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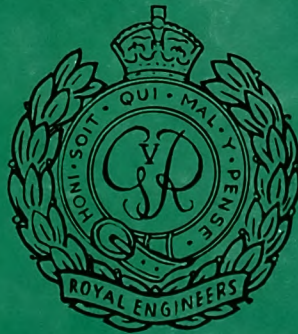


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186

COMPANY
SPECIAL BRIGADE
R · E







WITH THE SPECIAL BRIGADE, R.E.

A BRIEF STORY

OF

186 COMPANY, R.E.

AND

'C' SPECIAL COMPANY, R.E.

1915-1919

J.F.D.
72-5919

The author wishes to place on record his grateful thanks to his old friend and comrade Edgar Cross, now residing in Toronto, who has voluntarily organised and carried out the onerous task of printing all the text. This work has been performed with characteristic enthusiasm and efficiency, and ensured the success of the present issue, as well as a great saving of expense. We are delighted to hear of his determination to fly over again this year to share in the Reunion celebrations with us.

M.S.F. March 1957.

1915

1919

'C' SPECIAL COY., ROYAL ENGINEERS.

• ROLL OF HONOUR •

BULL. H.F.	KILLED IN ACTION	6. 11. 17.	MOORE. T.H.	DIED OF WOUNDS	26. 9. 15
BLADWELL. L.J.	" " "		MOSS. S.F.	KILLED IN ACTION	
BULMEN. E.	" " "	20. 8. 16	NAYLOR. S.	" " "	5. 10. 16
CHAPPLE. E.	" " "	9. 7. 18	PATERSON. T.M.	DIED OF WOUNDS	26. 10. 15
CAWTE. J.	" " "	8. 8. 17	PEXTON. G.E.	" " "	21. 8. 16
CURTIS. S.	" " "	20. 8. 16	POVEY. R.	" " "	10. 5. 18
DUNN. J.	" " "	5. 10. 17	PYNE. J.	KILLED IN ACTION	15. 5. 17
FOLEY. T.	" " "	15. 5. 17	RICE. J.W.	" " "	19. 8. 17
GORDON. G.	DIED OF WOUNDS	1. 6. 17	SHARP. B.	DIED OF WOUNDS	21. 8. 16
GREEN. L.	KILLED IN ACTION	24. 8. 16	STAFFORD. T.	" " "	12. 7. 18
GREEN. W.P.	" " "	28. 6. 16	STEWART. J.F.	" " "	28. 6. 16
HARRIS. R.	" " "	25. 9. 15	WEYMOUTH. G.T.	" " "	1. 10. 15
HARRISON. L.J.	DIED OF WOUNDS	21. 8. 16	WHAITÉ. W.	KILLED IN ACTION	26. 9. 15
IDDISON. W.J.	KILLED IN ACTION	5. 6. 17	WATSON. W.	DIED OF WOUNDS	2. 6. 17
HYSLOP. R.G.	" " "	5. 5. 17	WHITE. W.A.	KILLED IN ACTION	20. 8. 17
IRELAND. A.	DIED OF WOUNDS	21. 4. 17	WHITLAW. C.Y.M.	DIED OF WOUNDS	23. 7. 18
IRELAND. W.B.B.	KILLED IN ACTION	5. 6. 17	LEWIS. F.D.	" " "	6. 7. 15
LOXLEY. H.T.	DIED OF WOUNDS	14. 8. 16	FITZGERALD. (A.S.C.)		
MANSFIELD. G.H.	KILLED IN ACTION	4. 7. 16			
MAPP. S.K.	DIED OF WOUNDS	30. 8. 18			

RIP

THE ORIGINAL ROLL OF HONOUR IS KEPT PERMANENTLY ON VIEW AT THE IMPERIAL HOTEL,
RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON.

FOREWORD

Forty years is a long time, and one is apt to forget many things which happened so long ago. It may seem very strange that such a long period should have been allowed to lapse before this tale is told, even so briefly. Why should it be now? Among various reasons, there are two which we believe are important enough to vindicate our present effort.

The first is the fact that the memories of those stirring days of forty years ago are not really dimmed; rather are they recalled more vividly as one grows older, yet seen as through a mirror, the harsh lines softened and beautified with rainbow hues; colours which were certainly missing at the time of the events themselves. So that to look back is pleasurable, for the pleasant things are more enhanced than the unpleasant, the emphasis is on the good times rather than the bad, and those long-past experiences are to the traveller "like mountain ranges overpast, in purple distance fair." So although passed in the physical sense, the memories remain. Recalled by a chance sight or taste or smell, or by some association of ideas, or for no apparent reason at all, those friends from the past reappear in our thoughts, the dead often more vividly than the living.

On such occasions, if happily those thoughts are undisturbed, the years are rolled back, and the present is forgotten. We journey again at dusk the familiar road to the Line, and see the Verey lights rising, as they herald another night.

over No Man's Land; we recall the long walk over the barren and darkening plain, the rattle of arms and other equipment, the murmur of voices in low conversation; the line of sweating heaving men as they struggle in the darkness through the mud-filled and seemingly endless trenches with their loads, the scurrying rats, the friendly glimmer from an occasional dug-out as we pass; the silent sentry motionless on the firestep; the whine of a passing bullet or the crump of a shell; a stretcher party struggling by; and the cold dawn bringing yet another day of war. Or again, the vigorous cheery marching along French roads, our way enlivened by jovial quips and the songs to which our feet kept rhythm; the joy of being alive, and all jolly good company; living each day as it comes, with no thought of tomorrow. In billets with flickering candles lighting the walls of the ancient barn, stained and worn by the toil of generations of peasants; the smell of cattle and hay; men intent on reading their latest mail or busy writing home; a quiet game of cards; others already wrapt in sleep; deep snow and bitter wind outside.

But best remembered by all, the great comradeship; the pal who eased your burden, the one in whom you could always confide; who stood by you in the bad times of mud and blood and gas, in sickness and in health; who gave you assurance and kept you steadfast while suffering all the devilment that the enemy could devise, and was ready to risk his life for your sake; the one who made it all worth while.

The second reason is that while C Special Company R.E. played its full part throughout the War, its wartime activities were also closely

linked with a remarkable solidarity of comradeship which pervaded all ranks, officers and men alike and which kept us in good heart under all conditions. This comradeship survived the war, and led on to its continuation in the enthusiastic and unique Reunions which are still being celebrated annually. More of this achievement will be mentioned later, but when we recall that the personnel of the Company mustered only about two hundred men, it is a fact of which we are justly proud.

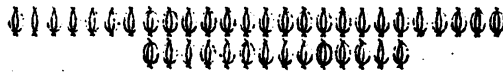
The passing of years inevitably brings a regrettable diminution of the number of those who assemble annually, but the spirit of comradeship among the members who are still left is as strong and precious as ever. Our thoughts dwell in honour of the memory of all our comrades who shared with us the vicissitudes of war, and those who have been privileged during the ensuing years to partake of the enriching joy which our annual Reunions always give to us.

The writer's warmest thanks are due to all those friends who have helped in such a splendid manner by their keen interest, their constructive criticism, the loan of much very valuable information and their financial support. Without these this souvenir could not have been produced with any approach to either accuracy or completeness.

Finally, special mention must be made of R.F. Dalton, who has been guide, philosopher, and friend throughout the ultimate production, and whose never failing enthusiasm has been a constant inspiration; and of G.W. Chester, to whom we are greatly indebted for so ably producing the attractive and appropriate cover design.

May the tribute bestowed on this story be not unworthy of our comrades of the Great War, for there is a great joy and pride in recalling those former days, and in recording something of their history; joy in the fellowship which those wartime conditions gave, and pride in the remembrance of a hard and exceptional task well done.

M. S. F.



CHAPTER ONE

HOW THE STORY BEGAN

The Great War, now known as the First World War, commenced on August 4, 1914, and its early events are sufficiently well known to all of us. Some months of fluctuating fighting took place in France and Belgium, during which the Allied armies succeeded in withstanding the onslaughts of powerful and numerically superior German forces, and a system of trench warfare developed during the following winter. When further German offensives commenced early in 1915, the city of Ypres was considered to be a key point in the British defence line, and fierce fighting broke out in this area during the month of April. In this, the second Battle of Ypres, the Germans made desperate efforts to break through the British positions with the object of opening the way to the Channel ports, and to this end they resorted to the use of poison gas. This was in defiance of the Hague Convention, at which all signatories, including Germany, had made solemn promises never to employ it. The gas used on this very first occasion was chlorine, and as the employment of such a war weapon was totally unexpected and completely unprovided for, it caused great loss of life among our troops, and resulted in a temporary but serious shaking of morale. The actual effect of this gas attack was even greater than the Germans apparently anticipated at the time, but they failed to take full advantage of their success, and a very precarious situation was quickly remedied.

As soon as the news of this diabolical action reached England, there was an immediate outcry for retaliation, and a great clamour arose in the Press for speedy reprisals. It was quickly decided by those in authority that retaliatory measures must be employed, and plans were at once put into operation for carrying out this purpose. In due course, the effect of this momentous decision was to bring into existence a body of men trained in gas warfare through much tribulation and from a necessarily very experimental start, but imbued with a keen spirit to do the original and difficult job allotted to them. These men, as subsequent history showed, accomplished their tasks with the greatest success in the face of bitter enemy opposition, and in spite of their most formidable antagonist, the appalling mud.

Certainly that decision brought together a mixture of men from all walks of life. The R. E. Corps accepted many of them almost willy nilly, gave them the merest suggestion of training in great haste, and then sent them into the front line trenches in the fervent hope that they would not fail. So it came to pass that, in due course, from the ranks of these men, tried and tested through all the rigorous experiences of trench warfare, the famous Special Brigade was evolved, a Brigade which proved itself to be one of the most unusual, secret, efficient, foolhardy and brave units of the British Army.

In connection with the new developments, the first men who enlisted were all ex-chemistry students in training in England. These sixteen in all and including one of the best known of later C Company personalities, D. R. Grantham, met at Chatham, and were immediately put to use. They were sent off at once, without ceremony, and without leave, to find themselves in France at St. Omer within twenty-four

hours. After being given one or two lectures on what was known or conjectured about the German use of gas, they were distributed around the various Army Corps, to do their best at giving anti-gas instruction; there ensued the phenomenon of lance-corporals, feeding in the sergeants' mess, and lecturing everyone from the General downwards. The morale of our troops was rapidly increased by the fact that they had made acquaintance with R.E. chemists who had not only smelt chlorine on many occasions, but knew how to make it, and still survived. Having done much good work, these sixteen men were withdrawn in July, and sent to join the new gas-operating units then beginning their training at Helfaut.

The new organisation began with the formation of four new companies of Royal Engineers, Nos. 186 to 189. These companies were totally different in the type of personnel, and certainly in the peculiar character of their task, from any R.E. contingent hitherto known; they were certainly destined to make new R.E. records. They were composed of men of varying age and experience and mainly of those who possessed or were acknowledged as possessing some knowledge of chemical science, and who could no doubt be trained to become reasonably adept at "letting off gas". The remainder were men already serving in the Army, and most of them had seen some service in the line; it was expected that these latter would impart a wholesome strengthening of morale to the raw scientists when the time came to "perform an experiment with chlorine" under enemy fire.

Since the official intention was to keep the organisation and its work absolutely secret, and rightly so, the unique personnel required was drawn into the bag by various subtle devices. Civilian chemists were strongly urged to enlist in the new

R. E. units, (The "Kitchener needs you" sort of idea), with the intimation that their specialized knowledge would be of great service. Those who were attracted assumed privately that they would be allotted such comparatively safe and interesting jobs as water-testing, and activities connected with sanitation and the general health of the troops. Tempting visions came to mind; the prospects were excellent, perhaps a post in Paris or Egypt, with the comfortable and homely conditions of a chemical laboratory or at least a travelling one; uniform, yes, and a little drill essential to keep one toned-up, and a pleasant bit of army training thrown in. Such delightful sentiments as these were not discouraged, for the moment.

It is worth noting that this type of bait was still being used at a much later date, when British gas activities were becoming known. There must have been many interesting and amusing incidents in this connection. To quote one of our number, Pnr. Chance, who enlisted much later: "I went to Curzon Hall in Birmingham, and took with me a pile of certificates to prove my suitability for work on chemical analysis, and other branches of science; but I carried no evidence to indicate my ability to do heavy portorage. However, I was taken in, in more senses than one!".

At the same time, it must be emphasised that there were many men who jumped at the chance of going to France speedily with the object of doing their share in the fighting; again, although there was official secrecy with regard to the use of gas, this secrecy was not necessarily actual, and there were some men who were convinced that gas would be used, and were quite eager to assist in the job.

Soldiers already in France, and some in England also, were drawn in by being asked to volunteer for

a change of work. The innocent question:--
 "Anybody with a knowledge of Chemistry?" caught its victims. It reminds one of another fragment of Army humour!--"Anyone here know anything about music?" And when some highly qualified musician admitted his claim, he was ordered to carry a piano down to the Officers' Mess!

However, there was the opportunity for a pleasant change to a cushy unit, probably farewell to the trenches, and perhaps the chance of a return to Blighty. Volunteers took two paces forward, and these two steps sent them on their way to the front line much sooner than even the most morbid could have anticipated. Revelations came soon afterwards, but it was then too late. The all-essential secrecy had been maintained, and ere long all members of this new organisation were devoting themselves with the utmost vigour and enthusiasm to the adventurous work which lay ahead. There were a few men who did not particularly wish to volunteer, but were persuaded by their C.O.s. to do so for various reasons, and they added to our ranks; but it should be emphasised that most of them, when given positions of responsibility, proved themselves to possess qualities which might well have surprised those in command of their original units. There were also men who wanted to volunteer, but were prevented from doing so by their C.O.s, and here a specific case can be quoted. The 21st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (4th Public Schools), which was formed in 1914, had its numbers seriously depleted by many hundreds of the rank and file being given commissions. As it appeared that the battalion would soon become a skeleton, the C. O. used his best endeavours to prevent further wastage. Many men, sick of the repetition of drill and spit and polish, and fearful that the war would end before they reached France, volunteered for the new R. E. Companies, but were turned down.

during the summer months of 1915, the War Office began to receive from Universities and Colleges, etc., the names of their students who had a knowledge of Chemistry. As the names came in, instructions were sent to the C.O.s of their units, transferring, without any question of obstruction, those serving men designated "chemists". Thus it was that certain members of 'C' Special Company, Cpls. Brindley, Dalton, Joyce, and Pheasey, got their transfers despite their colonel. Their first reaction was a feeling of immense relief at escaping from a battalion with a Guards adjutant and a Guards battalion sergeant-major. They crossed the Channel too late to participate in the Battle of Loos, but afterwards they had more than ample opportunity to indulge in their keen desire for the front line. No doubt, they applied a little of their chemical knowledge, but found as most others did, that the discharging of gas from cylinders was often an operation more suited for a plumber than a University graduate, and it may as well be confessed that some men became really adept plumbers, and learned many tricks of the trade under the most unusual conditions.

To quote from another description of the new formations: "As a military organisation they were probably unique, for many of their personnel wrote a degree at the end of their names, and some of them were kings in their own right in the world of science. The unit, however, was self-contained in a military sense and did its own work, and to the casual observer there was nothing to indicate that a bespectacled R.E. perhaps, performing some particularly menial job in a back area, was really a Doctor of Science, and an expert authority upon the properties of chlorine and phosgene"

The new units were certainly unique in another way. In the wisdom of some benign power, which later deeply regretted its action, all "other ranks"

were given the rank of full corporal, either on enlisting or transferring from other units. This was a truly remarkable distinction. It baffled the permanent sergeants who drilled them at Chatham, and it was apt to give apoplexy to any officer in the Regular Army, from Major upwards, who chanced to glance down the serried ranks, and failed to find even a single lance-jack or pioneer. The enthusiastic array of "two stripers" often gave a shock to other troops later on in France, when they beheld such a prodigal supply of corporals marching along a road or proceeding in single file up a communication trench; and the usual comment, uttered loudly in amazement, was "Look at 'em Bill, all bloody corporals!".

The existence of companies packed with corporals created a problem later on for the authorities, when changes in organisation were taking place, and they were pleaded with to forego that exalted rank indicated by two stripes. But, having been caught before, all the said corporals were wary, and with rising indignation, refused to accede to the request. Since the only alternative method of demotion was by conviction for some serious crime, which all abhorred, nothing further could be done in the matter, and the men retained their precious stripes.

Someone commented, hearing of our late exploits, that "We must have been either very brave men or completely 'nuts'!" No one has questioned the truth of the latter.

The original officers chosen to command the four companies were chiefly those who had considerable knowledge as research chemists, etc., and had also undergone a period of war experience in France. They proved to be well fitted for their exceptional responsibilities, and the organisation and consequent success in battle of the units under their command,

certainly during the early days of this new venture, was very largely due to their enthusiasm, initiative, and courage.

The choice of Commanding Officer for the entire new organisation fell upon Major C. H. Foulkes, R. E., an officer of the regular army who had been on active service in France since the first days of the war. He once made the astounding claim that he had never been lousy! No one took up the task with greater enthusiasm and optimism than he, and he was primarily responsible not only for the successful developments which followed, but for the later organisation which brought into being the Special Brigade, comprising nearly 6,000 men. He directed the operations of this Brigade throughout the war, forging a unit which was of the highest credit to the British Army, and a persistent and serious menace to the German forces arrayed against us. He rose to the rank of Major-General, and in addition to being awarded the C. B., C. M. G., and D. S. O., received many other decorations.

CHAPTER TWO

186 COMPANY R.E.

Throughout the summer months of 1915, from May onwards, the recruits of the new contingent assembled at the Royal Engineers' Depot at Chatham. In most cases, they did not remain there long. The customary equipment was speedily issued, the essential branding of which with the individual's regimental number was ordered at once, though we soon discovered that this job depended on the pleasure of some men in the depot staff, who claimed their usual "rake-off" for the kindness shown. Each day was fully occupied from early dawn to dusk, with medical inspections, teeth extraction, inoculations, kit inspections, and drill on the barrack square. Men of all types were meeting and adjusting themselves to live and work together; those who knew something of Army routine and peculiarities were very helpful to the raw recruits.

From the very start, rumours were rife. In due course, we were to learn that rumours were always common among large bodies of men often left in ignorance of affairs. Someone had heard a regular sergeant use the word "chemists", while another had actually seen an officer pass by, carrying a chemistry text book. We were on something good, and in our lengthy discussions portrayed an enjoyable time ahead. Each recruit had an individual interview with a small committee of officers; they beamed upon us, asked pleasant questions and left us no wiser; "How much chemistry have you done?"-----"Your record states that you

have a B.Sc. degree. Have you ever prepared chlorine, and would you recognise its smell?"---- "I strongly advise you to revise your chemistry a bit when you can, it will come in very useful; have a chat with corporal so-and-so, and he will refresh your memory!" The particular corporal recommended lost a leg a few weeks later at Loos, and so left the R.E.s. for ever, without much opportunity of imparting his extensive knowledge of gases.

Within two or three weeks at most, often much sooner, forty-eight hours' leave was granted, followed by the final departure. Small drafts of men left for France at intervals of a few days. We were mixed up with Welsh miners and similar gentle types, who constantly created enough liveliness during the last days in England. On one occasion, as the final parade was completed, and the sergeant who had nursed his section for a week or two bade them an affectionate goodbye, he bestowed his blessing with the words: "Well, good luck, and gas every b-- mother's son of them!" It seemed to be an odd comment for such a kindhearted N.C.O. to make, but it certainly provided food for thought during the ensuing journey.

Some drafts set off through the silent street in the early hours of dawn; on occasion, they were honoured by an R.E. band conducting them to the station, playing inspiring airs. Probably our departures were opportunities for a little band practice, but for some of us it was the one and only time when a band was in attendance to make us feel "real soldiers!"

The journey from Chatham to Southampton, and the crossing to LeHavre by night, were followed by a quiet leisurely passage up the windings of the Seine, where peasants waved to us from the fields.

and the picturesque riverside quays, among peaceful countryside.

At last we arrived at Rouen, with its famous cathedral looking down upon noisy quays, squalid streets, and the activities of swarms of British troops. There was a long march uphill all the way to a "rest camp" (strange name). There we had no sooner been allotted our tents than we were paraded to hear the usual address of welcome from a very severe, superior officer; we were told that we were now in France, on active service, and that anyone who deserted would be shot. This rather shook us, as it was definitely unfair, for we hadn't even thought of fighting still less of deserting. After all we had only just arrived! Afterwards there were further inspections, and another inoculation with the promise of twenty-four hours' rest, according to medical regulations. It was thus another unpleasant surprise to find ourselves on the move again within less than four hours, and so down the hill again to the railway station.

Where we were actually bound for only the sergeant in charge knew, and he was not allowed to tell us. As he had no idea of the whereabouts of our destination, it didn't much matter. However, there was the train journey to anticipate, and it exceeded all our expectations. It proved a long and tedious route from Rouen, though the actual distance was not great. Partly due to the congestion of traffic, the state of the permanent way, the condition of the engine, and the reluctant opening of the gates by aged nervous women officials, it was certainly not a joy ride. It was often quite easy to alight from the train to pick flowers, and run alongside for the amusement of our comrades, until there were ominous signs that the engine intended to speed up, and one's seat was regained in haste. The Engine, however, did its best by supplying us

with plenty of hot water for brewing tea. We existed on monotonous meals of biscuits, bully, and jam, and endured the continuous vocal accompaniment.

Having apparently gone around France two or three times, we alighted at the village of Wizernes; no friends to greet us, and no one to guide except a wizened Frenchman who waved his arms about, told us "la guerre no bon", and indicated the direction of the place named on the sergeant's chit; so away out of the village; around the bend where stood "Le Chat Noir" with its ghastly sign, and up a long hill in the hottest part of the day to Helfaut, which had been taken over as the R. E. depot for the coming gas offensive operation, and for which purpose it was retained throughout the war.

While standing outside the Orderly Room, awaiting our allotment to various Sections of the Company, each batch of arrivals looked around to find themselves being regarded by others with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. Fragments of conversation were at first mystifying and alarming. "Where have you fellows come from?"-----"Another lot of M-U-G-S."-----"It's no cushy job here, lads, but damned hard work."-----"The job is to let off gas, boys, and you'll find yourselves in the front line very soon."-----"You don't need to be a chemist; all they want are navvies!" Some men came across the road from the Common close by, making a weird sort of unsoldier-like procession; a pole was supported on the shoulders of every two men, and from each pole hung what was obviously a very heavy burden, covered negligently with a sack; the sack was there to ensure secrecy, so that no French civilian could observe the object beneath. A sack dropped off, and two tired men dumped their burden on the ground to rest their aching shoulders, and curse awhile; the burden was revealed as a gas cylinder, an object which was to be our special

care as an affectionate companion in the days to come.

We were taken on the strength of 186 Company R.E. Helfaut was a pleasant village on the edge of a large Common about 4 miles from St. Omer. It possessed a tall stone Obelisk called the Duke of Orlean's monument, marking the spot from which Napoleon reviewed his troops before Waterloo. Near by was a windmill for the grinding of corn, and one could obtain the French "cartwheel" loaves from the house attached; there was a modern type of school, and two or three estaminets; the church stood a little apart from the houses; all the inhabitants were very friendly, and we formed pleasant and lasting friendships. The Common was well-visited for our training operations which were already proceeding fast. Our billets were barns, and tents in the adjoining fields, and we soon learned officially of the particular work which we were expected to do. Our Section Officers gave us the first little comforting talks, emphasising the great essential, absolute secrecy, and letting us know of the coming use of poison gas by the British Army, and in fact, by that particular R.E. unit to which we now belonged. We became more closely acquainted with gas cylinders which weighed up to 130 lbs. when full, with a maximum content of 60 lbs. of chlorine; the presence of the 'gas' did not make them lighter!

The names "cylinder" and "gas" were strictly barred, a cylinder being officially a "toger" or an "oojah", though the men who carried them supplied numerous unofficial names in addition. The connecting pipes were of rigid iron with right angle bends, two or three being necessary for each cylinder according to its position in the trench.

The parapet pipes were about 10ft. long. For

discharging gas, the pipes were screwed together with a spanner, the parapet pipe thrown over the top of the trench, and then sandbagged down into position. We practised connecting and disconnecting and "turning on and turning off", in daylight and in dark, wearing our gas helmets. The aim was to work speedily and in safety; difficulties were encountered in the use of the pipes and although these could be overcome in training conditions, this was a serious fault which caused many casualties in our first real attack, using untested equipment. There was trench digging and strengthening, and all this was with a whiff of chlorine thrown in now and then. Our 'helmets' were of grey flannel, soaked in Hypo and Phenol, hence the designation "P H"; they had one celluloid eye window, and an expiratory tube and valve held in the mouth; when in use, this sort of bag helmet was tucked well in round the neck and under the tunic. It was hot and very uncomfortable to wear long. Wind observations and recording made a quiet interlude, interspersed with brief lectures about our work. We had been issued with revolvers, and some instruction was given on their use; a revolver was considered more suitable for our job than a rifle, which would impede the necessary work in a trench.

Having sized up our situation, and grasped the truth, our enthusiasm which had been momentarily chilled, speedily returned as all newcomers settled down to the work in hand. We realised that everybody was "in the same boat" so to speak, and would probably soon be in the same trench. The new conditions were accepted and enjoyed. It was a healthy life. As they lived and worked together men made new contacts, and formed friendships which became more closely knitted each day, and lasted throughout the War, or until some tragic event

separated by wounds or death those who had been such good pals.

Three R.E. Companies, 186, 187 and 188 were now in being and a fourth, 189, was formed soon afterwards.

During the Helfaut period, the Companies were certainly a motley crowd. There were representatives from almost every regiment in the British Army, displaying a varied but fascinating profusion of headgear, regimental badges etc., with kilts prominent. The new recruits were much impressed by the information vouchsafed to them repeatedly by the "old sweats" that the regiment from which they had come was undoubtedly the finest in the Army, and "right of the Line", whatever that meant, from the days of Waterloo. Gradually, various methods were employed to persuade the owners of distinguished apparel to look like ordinary R.E., and uniformity prevailed though occasionally a kilt came to light long afterwards.

Rumours soon commenced, and emanating from the Section Cooks were accepted as Gospel, that we should soon be on the move towards the line, and this proved to be true. The final parade took place on Helfaut Common, and some high ranking officer gave us a fighting speech, in which he informed us that a big battle was imminent, that the British would fire no less than 100,000 shells on to enemy positions, and that we had been allotted the important task of retaliating upon the Germans with gas, and that we were looked upon to do our utmost in this new type of warfare, playing our own special part manfully to make the battle a great victory.

On Sept. 4th, all R. E. Companies moved towards various parts of the Front in London motor buses, and lorries. 186 Company was under the command of Capt. Percy-Smith, being grouped with other Companies for the purpose of this first attack. This Commanding Officer had been seconded to us from an Indian Cavalry Regiment; he was famous for his long black glossy boots, and also for his vehement "My God" speeches. On one occasion two corporals were "on the mat" before him for being absent without leave. "My God, don't you know you can be shot for being absent without leave on active service? Admonished!" Exit corporals shaking with suppressed mirth: "My God Percy" turned to his young officers and said "My God, did you see how they trembled when I addressed them?"

186 Company reached Béthune and had hardly looked at their new billets, which were in French barracks near the Cathedral when the news swept through us that spies were about. A hasty departure took place, for even the cooks were not ready for this and were in the middle of making tea. We rushed off on lorries into the countryside and dusk found us at the small village of Busnes, where we remained for almost a fortnight. It was a quiet picturesque place, set among ripening orchards and cornfields, and the barns made comfortable billets. There was an attractive chateau surrounded by a moat prolific with fish, and this chateau was the Officers' billet, and Company H.Q. Away to the East, we heard the frequent rumble of guns, and at night saw the sky illumined by Verey lights, indicating our Front Line. We spent our time on drill, route marches and lectures, and began to gain more detailed information of our tasks in the coming battle.

On Sept. 17th, we said goodbye to our quiet life once again, travelled by lorries through Béthune, and on to La Gore railhead where a full day's work was put in, unloading cylinders for the line; afterwards we marched once more to new billets and found ourselves installed in a chicory factory, (henceforth known as "Chickory"), about a mile East of Béthune.

This building was the home of 186 Company and the centre of its operations for several months to come, and we were soon well acquainted with its advantages and the reverse. It was a large unattractive brick building, enclosed by a high brick wall and was quite near to La Bassée Canal. For washing purposes it was necessary to go out of the factory yard, cross a road, then a wide dyke by plank, then a railway line, and so on to the canal bank, where during our ablutions we were compulsorily exposed to all the winds that blew. An office adjacent to the one gateway made a convenient guard room and here it was that passing infantry stared in amazement when they saw that the guard composed entirely of corporals turned out to salute them. The officers were billeted in a small chateau close by. Several sections were allotted the upper rooms of the factory, and found that the floors consisted of iron gratings, which were there presumably for the purpose of drying chicory; they not only dried but froze us during the cold weather and blankets failed to keep out the cold; in addition, one's small belongings were apt to slip through to fall on the fellow below, and such happenings were not conducive to polite language on either side, especially if the commodity which descended was hot tea! There were one or two cottages beyond the canal swing-bridge, and the guardians of the latter possessed a stove in the middle of their one living room, and which dispensed

heat, perpetual coffee, eggs and chips and hot baths to all and sundry.

Each day we spent at the nearby railhead, unloading cylinders; they were then removed from their boxes and taken up the Line by lorries or horsed G.S. Wagons. Infantry parties carried them up to the Front Line where our R.E.s received them, fixed them safely into the required positions, and protected them as much as possible by sand bags from enemy shell fire. Some men went up for their first Line experiences and came back with interesting stories. One corporal apparently had not been unduly anxious about the close proximity of the Germans, but only about his situation among the Indian Troops there; the Indian sentry who shared the same front line post with him during the night could not converse, but spent most of the time gazing at him, while perpetually sharpening a wicked-looking knife!

On the evening of Sept. 23rd, we set off on our first adventure, and moved East along the South bank of La Bassée Canal, loaded with our pipes and spanners and implements of various kinds. A bottle of rum went with each section and certainly in one instance was handed over by the sergeant to the special charge of a confirmed teetotaller! It rained steadily,--the night was very, very dark; there was gunfire all around, and the flashes from our guns illumined the dark with great intensity, reflected in the pools ahead, and the canal to our left.

Crossing the canal, we passed through the ruins of Givenchy, and found dugouts for the night in the reserve line; machine guns close at hand added their chorus to the noises of the night. A portion of the Company had been billeted in the

village of Annequin, and went up to the line via Cambrin; as "comrades in arms" we welcomed them in the front line.

The following morning we went up to our individual positions for the attack, and began finding our way about the maze of trenches in our vicinity. There was some gunfire throughout the day, but nothing like what we had expected, and we could observe smoke rising from "bursts" among the enemy trenches; there appeared to be a desultory shelling of the German wire, but much of this was shrapnel, and could have had little effect. From the other side, there was very little retaliation, and we sensed a tense quietude of waiting. Carrying long parapet pipes up the winding communication trenches was not an easy job; one steered them round narrow corners, under strict orders of silence. But some men soon became fed up with this method, and hoisted the pipes vertically for all the world to see.

All ranks of our R.E. Companies had been issued with a brassard of pink, white and green bands, which indicated that we were doing a special job; this enabled us to move about the trenches without hindrance or suspicion; in fact there were instances when the infantry were glad to give us priority; a further use of the brassard was to permit our exit from the trenches when our job was done, as all sentries had been advised of this, though it didn't let us go far enough!

186 Company operated under the command of the 2nd Division (1st Corps), in the vicinity of Givenchy, just North of the La Bassée Canal, and Cuinchy, just to the South, our positions being almost in the centre of the long gas frontage. Since this front held no less than 5,500 cylinders, prepared to deliver 150 tons of chlorine, we were

certainly in the "thick of it", as later events showed. The number of cylinders for each emplacement varied from three to a dozen, with from three to six in the charge of one corporal. The night of Sept. 24/25th was a sleepless one; there were jobs to be done, messages to be carried, etc. The stretch of No Man's Land before us varied considerably in width being as much as 300 yds. in some places, while narrowing to as close as 25 yds. among the "Brickstacks"; a small salient called the "Ducks Bill" had been blown up recently by the enemy, and was a very hazardous spot. Sandbags containing the smoke candles were carried up, and stacked conveniently; at intervals we joined the sentry on the firestep and gazed across at the German lines; once or twice an enemy machine gun opened up, the bullets skimming our parapet with deadly precision, making bits of sandbag fly; a Verrey light soared over and dropping close to our trench, illuminated the scene for a few moments, leaving the darkness more intense; some rats came out of a hole at one end of the bay, scrambled up the side of the trench, gazed at us warily while sniffing the air, and disappeared over the top; orders were given quietly as the sentries were relieved; there was a tenseness of excitement, mingled with a foreboding of the morrow. The sky slowly lightened away to the East and as the order "Stand to" was passed along, the infantry manned the front line trench, in the chill of the early hours; one of the planes came over, reconnoitring the enemy lines. Then came the dawn, silent and dull; it was Sept. 25, 1915. We connected our pipes, and saw that all was ready for action. At intervals an officer and sergeant came along to see if all was well and preparations complete, and to synchronise our watches, a most vital detail for such an attack.

That all important factor, the wind, began to be capricious; before midnight it had been blowing gently in an Easterly direction, which was ideal, but towards dawn its direction became more and more unfavourable. There was actually a general drift from South to North, but these variations would cause the gas to move across No Man's Land satisfactorily in some places, while in others the wind was completely unfavourable. A precarious situation arose, and Capt. Percy-Smith tried to have the orders cancelled well before zero hour, but he was overruled by H.Q. where someone in complete ignorance of what his decision would involve, insisted upon the suicidal order remaining, and some officers were thus compelled to obey the orders against all common sense.

Zero hour for the gas attack was 5:50 a.m., and at this exact moment, in conjunction with a sudden outburst of artillery bombardment, the gas and smoke were released. According to the number of cylinders allotted, the period of discharge varied, but continued in general for half an hour, the gas being much thickened up with the smoke. When it was seen that the gas was moving satisfactorily, smoke candles were ignited, and flung over the parapet. But in those unfortunate areas where the released gas was blown back into our own lines, the cylinders were quickly turned off, though too late to avoid gas entering portions of our front line; serious casualties were caused among the infantry assembled there, as well as among our own Companies. Because of his experience on that occasion, there is more than one Infantryman who still believes that it was a German gas attack, and not ours.

Some copies of the actual orders issued to corporals in charge of the gas emplacements on this

memorable day still exist, and are treasured by their owners. One such is in the possession of J. R. Roberts (Llangollen), who went through the thick of it all on that occasion; the paper is torn, and soiled with the mud of the front line trench, and at the top is scrawled hastily in pencil the actual zero hour, 5:50 a.m.

Secret.----(Not to be carried forward in the Assault).

TIME TABLE OF GAS

Attacks South of the La Bassée Canal.

Minutes.

- C. Start the gas and run 6 cylinders one after the other at full blast until all are exhausted.
- 0.12-0.20. Start the smoke. The smoke is to run concurrently with the gas if the gas is not exhausted by 0.12.
- 0.20. Start the gas again and run 6 cylinders one after the other at full until all are exhausted.
- 0.32-0.40. Start the smoke again. The smoke is to run concurrently with the gas if the gas is not exhausted by 0.32.
- 0.38. Turn all gas off punctually.
Thicken up smoke with triple candles.
Prepare for assault.
- 0.40. ASSAULT.

On the 3 cylinder and no cylinder fronts the smoke will be started at 0.6.

Note. From C to 0.40, front system of hostile

Note

cont'd. trenches will be kept under continuous shrapnel fire. Defences further in rear under bombardment of H.E. shell of all calibres.

At 0.40 artillery fire will lift as required.

The great infantry assault began at 6:30 a.m., but from the moment that gas was released, the German retaliation continued. It was very heavy and in many places very accurate; large shells fell in or near our front line, while shrapnel rained down from above. Some bays were blown in almost completely burying the cylinders and their crews, connecting pipes were blown about and severed, while some cylinders were burst, pouring gas into our trenches. 186 Company received many casualties in killed, wounded and gassed, as also did the others. It was certainly going through its "baptism of fire", but in spite of the unprecedented conditions, the men carried out their work thoroughly and unflinchingly, while paying heavily for it. As soon as possible the cylinders were protected and the trench made clear for infantry to pass through. When the order to retire came, the men had to make their way through the waiting or advancing troops who were packing the trenches, whilst still under heavy snellfire.

After some hours, enemy fire lessened, and the gas personnel were able to return to billets, most suffering to some extent from the effects of gas. Reservé positions, roads, etc. were still being bombarded and the canal route back was very dangerous.

Later reports gave convincing proof that, in

spite of some failures and serious blunders, the gas attack as a whole had been very successful, causing heavy casualties and demoralising many of the enemy, and it had enabled the infantry to carry out their difficult tasks much more easily and with fewer casualties than would otherwise have been the case. Big inroads into the German trench system were made, and it was tragic that other failures caused the infantry to be compelled to return to their own lines; there had been a reluctance to use the reserve divisions, in addition to disastrous routing by the Staff. But Loos village was taken and held, and our troops continued to hold a considerable salient in the German lines. We were destined to see much of this famous village during later periods of the War. The actual battle here continued for another four days, with the tides of fortune moving to and fro, and then gradually calmed down to normal trench warfare again.

While those of our Company who had emerged more or less scatheless from their first ordeal were resting on the following day, sudden orders were received to prepare for another attack. The same evening we set off in lorries. In Béthune and neighboring villages one passed the inhabitants walking to church, mostly women and all dressed in black, waving to the convoys of wounded streaming back from the battlefield.

From La Bassée road we entered the trenches, and proceeded direct to the front line, among the brickstacks at Cuinchy. The opposing lines were much too close for comfort, though our trenches were deep. Bomb throwing was commonplace and one never knew what might happen at any moment; sentries had to maintain special vigilance, and enemy snipers were very active, periscopes being frequently shattered by a good shot. Since the start of the Loos battle, heavy shelling of our

front line by 5.9s, nicknamed "Jack Johnsons" and "Coal Boxes", had been fairly continuous, and it was difficult to move far because of emplacements being blown in and trenches completely blocked. Throughout the hours of the 27th, our line was strafed, but the gas attack fixed for 5:00 p.m. was duly carried out in support of an attack on some portion of Hill 70 by the Guards Division. The wind was quite favourable, and the gas discharge very successful, for the lessons learned by us two days before had been helpful. We remained in the front line for a further two days, in case of need, but there were no more calls upon our services; the battle was over. On the 25th, some of our infantry had gone "over the top" from our support lines, and many were killed before they reached our own front line trench; there were many brave acts occurring at this period, whilst bringing in the wounded under fire. As we came out, long rows of dead lay near the communication trenches awaiting burial. The Loos battle had been a partial success but a costly one.

The Company was now settling down at "Chickory"; trench fatigues took up much of our time, removing cylinders from the line, and working in trenches or at railhead in preparation for further operations. New types of pipe connections were constructed by ourselves, chiefly of rubber hose and tested by ourselves under high pressure, so that all pipe equipment was much improved and trustworthy; danger from leaks was now almost non-existent. Lt. Livens was directly responsible for much of this good work, and well deserved the promotion which he received for this and later valuable assistance and ingenuity.

After Loos, our buttons and cap-badges were green from the effects of chlorine. We were very

proud of this distinction for it showed that we had really been in the war. But Lt. Acland of Section 6 made his men smarten up, and insisted on the use of metal polish; the rest of us despised them, and they were dubbed "The shiny sixth!"

An Order of the Day was issued by Lt.-Col. C. W. Foulkes, D.S.O., Commanding Special Companies R.E. on Oct. 8, 1915, worded thus:

"Gas is not to be discharged from any emplacement where, owing to the direction of the wind, it is clear our own infantry will suffer. Section Officers should take the responsibility on their own shoulders in this matter, and it should not be thought necessary to refer to higher authority. I thought this was understood already but apparently it is not so!"

Our next operation was in support of an attack with the object of recapturing an exceedingly strong front in the enemy trench system, known as the Hohenzollern Redoubt, near Cambrin, and we quickly prepared for this; front line conditions were comparatively quiet, and the trenches reasonably dry. The attack opened at 1 p.m. on Oct. 13th; in some parts the wind was very favourable, and the usual chlorine went over very successfully, while in others there was too little wind and hence without hesitation, the gas discharge was not permitted; the only part some R.E.s played in the attack was to be heavily bombarded by H.E. shells and trench-mortars, but casualties were light. The gas cloud greatly assisted the infantry who captured their objectives with little loss, though once more losing them through other failures. On leaving the trenches en route for billets, we experienced our first dose of lachrymatory shells, which came over in a deluge, and caused much inconvenience.

An issue of improved gas helmets was very welcome; the PH with celluloid window was changed for the PHG, the G meaning goggles which could be screwed out and cleaned when required, and these gave better visibility.

As winter approached, the states of the trenches grew rapidly worse in spite of all the work done by troops in the line. Heavy rain made them into channels of mud and water, causing laborious hours to be spent in removing cylinders and installing others.

One recalls the gum-boat stores in Guinchy where, before entering the trenches, we were fitted more or less accurately with thigh-length wading boots. Despite the length of the boot, a missing duck-board or one insecurely fastened precipitated many of us into the liquid mud. This was conducive to profanity. Sometimes our hasty footsteps passed the pump of sinister repute; the noise of its creaking pump-handle was often followed by a fusillade from German machine guns. Well, we knew the Brickstacks, a group of some two dozen stacks of which half were held by us. Pounding by German artillery had reduced their height and consolidated their substance. In their upper stories were ensconced M.G. emplacements and snipers' posts; in the basement were dugouts. The Germans utilised their brickstacks in the same way so that it was considered ill-advised to encourage German marksmen by walking erect in daylight along a shallow trench, or to invite enemy attention at night by the glow of a smoker's pipe in the nearby communication trenches. On occasion our men returned from the front line by the trench leading to the appropriately named Harley Street first aid post. This trench had an overhead rail for the carrying of slung stretchers, and many a weary corporal

used the rail hand-over-head while the mud sucked at his feet. Infantry Officers and sergeants were equipped with long ash poles for probing the depth of mud and water. Somewhere near were Railway Triangle, and series of "Keeps" or strong points. Lines were being blown up constantly, with the result that the character of the trenches was repeatedly changed. A soup kitchen, at which wet and cold troops leaving the trenches were regaled on melted grease and beef-tea, was often visited before rejoining our faithful lorries en route for "Home".

A favourite comment on reaching a formidable stretch of knee-deep water was the cry "Gangway for the Naval officers gig". One trench which we had frequently to use ran under a road, and the tunnel was a favourite spot for floods; if you were fortunate enough to have water-proof boots, they were likely to fill with water; if you lowered your head too much to avoid contact with the jagged roof, your chin was likely to become submerged. As for rats, this area was famous for outsize specimens, for they had gorged on the numerous unburied dead in the vicinity and they were impudent beyond belief. Enemy sniping was much too accurate to be appreciated. In addition, "whizz-bang" strafes increased and there was persistent trench mortar activity against our front line, as though the Germans sensed further gas operations; one could do nothing against "whizz-bangs", which were shells fired from field artillery at short range; as someone said: "The first thing you knew about their coming, is when they've arrived." The trench mortar was at its worst at night, for in daylight you could see the huge bomb lobbing over, and might be able to judge which way to move along to avoid it, but in the night, though you might be lucky to spot the burning fuse, it was impossible to judge

where it would drop. At night, our machine gunners would amuse themselves by firing messages to Fritz in Morse Code, often getting suitable replies in return.

During December, we had our first experience of postponed attack, going up to our front line posts on no less than four nights, just South of La Bassee Canal, and preparing fruitlessly for zero hour; the amount of walking and wading done was a test of physical endurance in itself, apart from the long hours of waiting in the darkness at our emplacements; but the wind proved favourable on the night of Dec. 21st, and 700 cylinders of chlorine were discharged at zero, 8.0 p.m. A few casualties were caused by mortar fire.

If any surviving members of 186 Company suffer from rheumatism, they caught it then.

Thus our first Christmas at the front arrived. Interspersed among our concentrated trench work, there had been fortunately some pleasant interludes. We had paraded on occasion for the benefit of some General or other, but never produced an attractive display; in any case, no Regular Staff Officer could grasp the significance of a unit with no one below corporal's rank; truly we were "Fred Karno's Army". Also it was while at "Chickory" that we were assembled in a field close by, and given an intriguing address, leading up to the request that we should voluntarily relinquish our two stripes and become ordinary rankers. The thought made us shudder, "to be or not to be" and the entire Company spurned the suggestion; thus as corporals we carried on. We had a surprise visit from the young Prince of Wales, but he was through the gate before our guard could stop him. Our chief joy was an occasional pass to Bethune, where we found

some of the Divisional concert parties highly entertaining and of quite high class. The outstanding performance was a Divisional Pantomime Show entitled "The Babes in the W (censored)". This was extremely good and crammed with typical army humour. One or two of our number still treasure the original programme provided. There was a memorable occasion when the first two men departed "on leave"; they were regulars who had been in France from the beginning of the War; the whole Company swarmed into the yard to see them off, and gaze in envy and wonder; "Blighty" to us seemed to be another World.

Of our Officers, we recall Lts. Acland, Dunn, Livens, Leach, Kent, Nye, Oates, Robertson, Sewill, White and Wilson.

After Loos, our C.S.M. was Snell, a tall slim fellow from the Guards, who tried to make us "jump to it"; the one in charge at Helfaut was quite a youth, and lost his life on Sept. 25th, through firing at a dud cylinder to release the gas. Our C. Q. M. S. was Hunter, a very smart, snappy soldier, excellent at his job, and from Glasgow; needless to say, there were none like the "bonnie lads frae Glasga'", but it was just as well, for usually only his bonny lads knew what he was talking about.

Of our Section cooks, there was Jock--of the famous H.L.I.; he was not particularly famed for the stews he served up, but rather for his crown and anchor board and a belt decorated with a collection of regimental cap badges, and stuffed with hundreds of franc notes; alas, his fast life ruined his health, and he soon left us to return no more. There was an Irish cook, Mac Cheyne, another "old sweat" who was very skilful at making souvenirs from shell cases, bullets, etc., and he did a good

trade among the newcomers. One morning he was serving out the bacon rations, when a certain corporal had the audacity, while waiting in the queue, to put his slice of bread into the pan to absorb some tasty "dip". The Irish blood rose at once, and Mac Cheyne attacked him, flinging the bread to the ground. An orderly room enquiry followed, and an argument revolved round the query as to whether a soldier was entitled to that portion of dip which belonged to his bacon portion. The burning question of the day was "Is dip a ration?", and it has never been satisfactorily answered.

So many incidents of that time can be recalled and every corporal has his own particular memories. There was the trouble caused by cylinder boxes being appropriated and broken up to make beds on the iron grilles; Lt. Livens obtaining two lorry loads of shower baths for the Company's benefit simply by skilfully supplying the lorry drivers with the wrong instructions; Corporal 'Tich', a very diminutive fellow who was repeatedly to be seen digging exceptionally deep holes near the billets; apparently this work was the punishment for his customary crime, drunkenness and running about the place naked on pay night. The holes he dug were of such a depth that we wondered how he ever got out of them again; but somehow he did. Then there came pay night and he was back at it again, digging deep holes. Another corporal while on duty overheard an elaborate explanation of the principle on which a cylinder acts when discharging gas; a Staff Officer was being shown round, and, observing a section of a cylinder revealing the long central tube, enquired earnestly how the gas came out of it; a gas officer, also of high rank, pulled himself together and gave a convincing lecture on capillary attraction, which commenced as soon as

the valve was opened, and the Staff Officer thought it was marvellous. Shortly after 'Loos', some men of the K.R.R.s were removing cylinders from a front line trench, and were instructed to deal with the full ones first and the empty ones afterwards; one enquired "Why, what's the difference, there's no weight in smoke, is there?" On being told that the smoke was in liquid form, he accepted the explanation, and proved it by trying to lift a full one.

The nightly picket at "Chickory" had the job of guarding certain stores and the more important task of preventing men at night using the yard as a "convenience" instead of going to the proper but more distant place; time--early morning hours--officer arrives with torch; the corporal on duty sees him, and observes that he is not one of our Section Officers, but at least the O.C. or Adjutant; he expects to be questioned and inspected, instead of which the said Officer requests him to hold the torch, while he carries out the forbidden operation. What else could the corporal do?

At one period near to Christmas, some of us were called upon for duty in connection with the testing and demonstrating of a new invention, known as "Capt. Bellairs' gun"; one supposes it came to us, because gases were used in the firing thereof. It was a large unwieldy apparatus, possessing a tank into which a firing mixture of hydrogen and oxygen was passed from cylinders; there were four long barrells, which were each loaded with 16 bombs of the Mills' grenade type, and thus on firing, a shower of 64 bombs was thrown into a confined area two or three hundred yards away. It worked beautifully, and the Captain was highly pleased with the accuracy with which we fired it before a galaxy of the Divisional Staff; but these officers

rode away unimpressed as the General told Capt. Bellairs to come again when he had devised something which would fire about a half a ton! We were never called upon to demonstrate again, and "Billy Bellairs" departed with his fur collar, chauffeur, and gun.

As Christmas approached, there was a great demand for the silk-worked postcards displayed in the shops in Béthune; the sentiments expressed on them were very appealing with "pensées" for thoughts,--"mes tendresses", "mille baisers", and the like. Doubtless they were appropriate for our lady friends in Blighty who received them.

Our Christmas Dinner in France, the second occasion for some of us, was greatly enjoyed, and we were grateful for the Christmas Puddings kindly provided by some English newspapers. We were all as one at this season, and a comment made in recent days by Major Nye aptly assesses the spirit of the time: "I was always impressed by the astonishing happiness and completeness of the amalgam between the chemical corporals and the old soldiers, the 'old sweats' who were brought in to leaven the scientific lump, so to speak. It was incredible how well they got on together, and in particular, how soon the scientists picked up the 'old sweats' knowing ways"

The arrival of the New Year was celebrated with joy and much army boisterousness; everyone crowded into the yard, where a bonfire of cylinder boxes illuminated the scene, and the assembly was noisy enough when the officers of 186 Company, some equally drunk, joined the merry throng; at midnight the guardroom bell was violently tolled and "Auld Lang Syne" and the National Anthem was sung; "My God" Percy-Smith, the O.C., a nice enough

fellow, though perhaps not the most exemplary of officer, vociferated his belief that the Germans were already defeated; that if they were not, My God they soon would be; and that we would blue pencil the blue pencils to blue pencil Hell; this well thought-out speech was much to the liking of the drunks who then sang "For he's a jolly good fellow!"

Late in 1915, a "commercial-traveller" party under Major Garden, with twelve corporals, including Cpl. Grantham and two others from 186 Company, took out a cargo of "oojahs" to the Mediterranean theatres of war, but they had no success in selling them to any of our several commands in the Near and Middle East. The cargo leaked throughout the voyage causing the party to move quickly from one port to the next. Having visited Madros and Alexandria, they returned forlorn to Glasgow, and some months later rejoined us at Hallines. A story, perhaps apocryphal, spread that the ship's crew had been near mutiny because of the leaking gas. They were pacified by the assurance that the smell was due to chloride which had been sprinkled over the cylinders to prevent them going bad!

What of the songs that cheered the corporals when journeying between their billets and the Line, or when admiring the countryside on their route marches? Most popular of all was the brilliant parody on Fred Karno's Army; the words rose from the very hearts of the singers, pouring forth with great gusto and deep feeling. This song was banned on secrecy grounds, but remained the song of songs. It would be an insult to the poignant memories of those glorious days if the verses of this song were to be omitted.

FRED KARNO'S ARMY

(Tune--The Church's One Foundation)

1. We are Fred Karno's Army,
The Roger Corps R.E.
We cannot march, we cannot fight,
What ruddy good are we?
But when we get to Berlin,
The Kaiser he will say,
"Hoch, Hoch, mein Gott,
They're a ruddy fine lot."
And then he'll fade away.
2. Now when we joined the army,
In the good old days of yore,
They gave us each two ruddy stripes,
Hell only knows what for.
We carried jolly Rogers,
Until our backs were sore,
And when we'd let the blighters off,
We carried up some more.
3. We go route marches daily,
And step it out so grand;
The Tommies shout as we march out,
"All corporals! well, I'm damned."
Although we are all corporals,
We do fatigues galore,
Latrines and guards, and sweeping
yards,
Oh, what a ruddy war!

A third parody was not of a suitable rhythm for marching, but it had a rousing chorus, and every line was appropriate.

CORPORALS ALL

1. Now come all you folks, and listen to me,
And I'll tell you the story of an R.E.
Company.
One-eight-six was the Company's name,
In the glorious offensive they won their
fame.
 2. We started out from Helfaut, and got to
Béthune.
They didn't want us there, so they sent us to
Busnes.
The billets they were cushy, the estaminets
très bon,
But that state of happiness didn't last long.
 3. We went up to the trenches, and we filled 'em
full of fear;
We gassed a Major-General, and we gassed a
Brigadier.
The infantry detest us, and make remarks at us,
As we ride up to the Line in a posh motor-bus.
- Chorus: Corporals all, looking ruddy cheerful,
Corporals all, spanners in their hands,
Corporals all, lying on their bellies,
Gassing back the Germans to the
Fatherland.

A song which was a favourite for quick marching was given to us by the Scotties. On many a cold winter morning as we left "Chickory" for a day's heavy fatigue at railhead. The echo of our voices rippled the chilly waters of La Bassée Canal,

and artillery men watering their horses muttered:
 "Those damn corporals are at it again."

Hey Mary, Bonnie Mary will you marry me?
 Change your name to MacIntosh, it's better
 than McGee.

Oh, the winter time is coming, with the
 hail and rain and sna'.

I'll be your macintosh, and keep the rain
 awa'.

Many other songs come to mind, among them: "Here's
 to good old whisky, drink it down", with its
 chorus "Rolling home by the light of the silvery
 moon"; also the one which so aptly expressed our
 feelings on our homeward way.

"Show me the way to go home,
 Never more to roam.
 Put me down by the railroad track,
 And I'll find my own way home."

Sentiment, of course it was, but it linked
 us all in a common bond, and eased many a heart.
 Such memories recall again the Verey lights
 rising over No Man's Land, the flash of guns, the
 whine and crump of a shell, the lorry swaying
 along the uneven roads, and the silent stars, cold
 overhead.

CHAPTER THREE

1916, AND THE BIRTH OF THE SPECIAL BRIGADE

We were not destined to remain much longer in our chicory factory billets. The opening days of the New Year were occupied on trench fatigues, removing cylinders from the front line. Trench conditions were at their worst, and the weather was bitterly cold. After working for several hours among the mud, harassed by mortar fire, and then tramping back two or three miles through mud and water on our way to our transport, finding the inevitable loose duckboard, and avoiding shell-holes by the way, we were usually all in, and kipped down under our blankets as soon as we had disposed of our tea. Journeyings to and fro each day through the long and winding trenches were considered worse than any happenings in the front line.

But early in January, rumours flew around once more, and welcome ones they were. They were certainly sensational. All the four Companies were to be reorganised and expanded, and for this purpose they were to be withdrawn from the line. Where would this reorganisation take place? All agreed that it would at least be some place far back, while the more optimistic members felt quite certain it would be done at Chatham. This was the H.Q. of the Royal Engineers in England, and what spot could be better? We should probably cross to Blighty secretly by night, and then be

granted leave at once on arrival! Something went wrong with this, however, for we never reached Chatham, or even saw the cliffs of Dover. Thank God, we always had optimists among us, and they kept us going, however dark the night. Our sergeants of course knew less, and pretended that they knew more.

On January 8th, we departed Westward in lorries, said goodbye to Bethune (for a season), and by evening found ourselves back again in the vicinity of Helfaut, 186 Company being quartered in the neighbouring village of Bilques. The peacefulness and beauty of this place were a great boon to us; after several months we were away from the sound of guns, and out of reach of shell-fire; houses and barns had their roofs intact. The pleasant scenes and activities of a farming community surrounded us.

There were early snowdrops and the violet-hued blossoms of perwinkle in the woods, though winter had not yet gone. We recalled to mind many good comrades who had gone from us, and who would have appreciated so much this wonderful change.

It was decided to arm the Company guards with rifles, hence instruction in rifle drill was given, using the few weapons at our disposal. In future the "all corporal" guards looked much smarter, and the men felt proud of themselves, at a new dignity conferred. Breaking into our serenity, it was revealed that we had been 'invited' to assist at a local attack in the line further North, and a portion of the Company was asked to volunteer. Under the command of Lts. Acland, Kent, and Nye, the party moved up to positions just North of Armentieres on the 25th Divisional front, and operated at Le Touquet. There was speedy work in

connection with the installing of cylinders, and the completion of our preparations. A big infantry raid was fixed for the afternoon of January 19th, and our gas was to act as a screen and diversion. This was our first daylight show, zero hour being 4:30 p.m. 400 cylinders of 'Blue Star' gas was discharged, as a variation from the usual chlorine (Red Star); Blue Star was a mixture of 80% chlorine with 20% sulphur chloride, the latter gas increasing the density of the cloud.

The whole operation was a great success, and the infantry obtained some valuable prisoners. Being a daylight affair, our attack provoked prompt German retaliation, very accurate and very heavy; almost every emplacement was blown in by whizzbangs, and sentries were swept from the fire-step. A two hours "strafe" with trench mortars prevented our retirement, but, although there were one or two casualties, the deep traverses between the bays seemed to keep most of us immune. Afterwards, the Infantry Divisional Commander personally thanked us at a special parade. The surprise on his face was unforgettable when he saw a lot of our lads unceremoniously dressed in gun boots, cardigans and cap comforters. Our appearance on parade was far from the smart regimental turn-out to which he was accustomed. But, as a matter of fact, many of our number had lost their kit in the line, and he was lucky to see us as respectably dressed as we felt we were.

On January 28th, we were officially informed of the imminent reorganisation, and learned that our four R.E. Companies were to be enlarged to Special Battalions, forming the nucleus of a big contingent for gas offensive operations; and bearing the name of the Special Brigade, R.E. Not only cloud gas was to be our weapon, but some Companies

would be trained in trench mortar work to fire other obnoxious chemicals in addition to gas, Flame throwers (which the Germans had already employed) would also be used. The detailed organisation involved the formation of four battalions each composed of four companies, designated from A to Q, for the continuation and development of cloud gas offensive, using cylinders. The members of our four original companies thus became the core of the new battalions, and were eminently fitted for training any newcomers. There were to be four Special Companies, Nos. 1 to 4, for operations with Stokes mortars, and four Special Sections comprising Z Company, to use flame throwers and other ingenious devices which their new commanding officer, Major Livens, could conceive. Capt. Percy-Smith, O/C 186 Company, now left to return to his Indian Cavalry Regiment; Capt. Monier Williams became Major O/C 1st Battalion, and Capt. T. H. Davies from the Australian Light Horse, became O/C of the new C Special Company.

On February 12th, 186 Company marched off for the last time as an original unit, to new billets at Hallines, a village beyond Helfaut, on the St. Omer-Boulogne Road. It was here that the necessary changes were quickly made, and the original corporals, now feeling as competent and battle-scarred as the 'old sweats', were shared out. The new formation was based upon the principle that there should be one Company acting in co-operation with one infantry division when in the line, and since a single divisional front usually approximated to 1,500 yds., six sections each covering about 250 yds., would be required per Company. The average number of personnel in each Company was about 200. This arrangement proved to be quite convenient in practice.

Another good point was that, whereas in former attacks only two men, and sometimes one man had to work an emplacement, the minimum used in future would be three. Thus C Special Company came into being. There was some shuffling round of billets, and then we quickly settled in the comfortable barns and outhouses. One batch of eight valiant corporals was given possession of a small stable, and made it like home, in spite of a couple of huge and lively Flemish carthorses next door.

Most of the new officers were chosen from the ranks of the original four companies and thus had had considerable experience of front line work. Lt. White was now 2nd I/C to Capt. Davies, the other officers being Lts. Armstrong, Gilliland, Hemens, Hopkins, Kent-Jones, Richards and Sewill. Lt. Armstrong had been seconded from the D.L.I., Lts. White and Sewill had been officers in 186 Company, and the others were commissioned from the ranks. Lts. Gilliland, Hemens, Hopkins and Richards had all been corporals in 186 Company, Section 6.. Lt. Kent-Jones received his commission soon after our arrival at Hallines. Lt. Grantham had been in 186 Company for most of the time, and then partook of all the indulgences of a Mediterranean trip during the winter, carrying unwanted and leaking cylinders from place to place. After this he returned to us and was commissioned in May.

The reinforcements for the enlarged formations started to come out to us from England in March: they included transfers from the Lincolns, Middlesex, Royal Fusiliers, Post Office Rifles, Gordons, etc. The new men held the rank of pioneer, so that at last the regime of "all corporals" came to an end. Our six sections were soon up to the required strength, and as far as one

can recall, were constituted thus:-

Section 13, Lt. D. W. Kent-Jones
 Section 14, Lt. F. A. R. Hopkins
 Section 15, Lt. E. S. Armstrong
 Section 16, Lt. T. Gilliland
 Section 17, Lt. E. M. Richards
 Section 18, Lt. G. F. Hemens.

^{Sewill}
 Lt. ~~Dweill~~ had been Battalion Adjutant for a time, and then joined us. He fixed up our forward billets and reconnoitred the 15th and 16th Divisional fronts where we were to operate. We quickly became acquainted with the friendly inhabitants of Hallines, and many of our number soon found a house where they were very welcome, sipping coffee round the stove, and rapidly becoming one of the family, while others had reserved seats in one of the estaminets. One or two corporals obtained special jobs as members of a sanitary squad, without application, though the possession of a Ph.D. or some other high academic degree seemed to be an essential qualification. Because of their exceptional duties, they were excused many parades, and finding that the children of the village were receiving no schooling, they organised a small but highly efficient school in one of the cottages. Their efforts were eminently successful for a time, but in due course certain higher powers heard of it, and the praiseworthy attempts to educate some of our young allies came to an abrupt end. Cpl. Holroyd, known as "little Holroyd", for he was of diminutive stature, was a member of this sanitary squad. He was well-known, though very unobtrusive character both in 186 Company, and during our days at Hallines. He wore at all times a neck screen in case the sun shone, and went quietly and efficiently about his duties, however lowly they might be. Few of us knew that he was the son of a Colonel in the Indian Army, and



SECTION 12, C SPECIAL COMPANY, R.E. [LT. D. R. GRANTHAM].



SECTION 13, C SPECIAL COMPANY, R.E. [LT. D. W. KENT-JONES].

had been educated at Winchester, Oxford, and Munich; he had high academic qualifications. He was over 40 years of age and probably the oldest man in the Company, having enlisted as a private in a Cyclist Battalion in 1914. He was promoted to corporal on joining the R.E.s and this was the limit of his promotion. He was never separated from his pocket dictionary and had often been observed squatting on a firestep in the front line, studying the conjugations of French irregular verbs while awaiting further orders. It was a rule of conduct that he should wash his feet every morning, instead of devoting his spare moments to shaving. Thus it came about that he was more than once reported for not having shaved for early morning parade, while probably he was the only man in the Company parading with clean feet. He was recalled for munition work late in 1916.

The surrounding area was an excellent one for our training; there were good roads for route marching, and fields and wild places where we could lose ourselves on night operations; to the North of the village, there was a Common where we carried out revolver practice, and dug trenches which we often used for mock gas attacks. At such times there was good practice with bombs and smoke candles. Our P.H.G. helmets were changed for the new box respirator type, which consisted of a container filled with gas-absorbing chemicals and connected by rubber hose to a mouthpiece and nose clip, with separate goggles. Such a respirator had already been issued to machine gun crews. We sat in gas clouds, and proved the new respirator's efficiency; there was one drawback, remedied later; the nose clip (whose purpose was to ensure inhaling through the mouth-piece) was very uncomfortable and hence often not used when it should have been, so that unnecessary whiffs

of gas were invited by some. It was certainly unwise to neglect it when a dose of Fritz's 'sneezing-gas' came over in shell-fire.

All this training was very intensive, and the new pioneers soon settled down to the unaccustomed work. There were frequent lectures. One corporal writing home at this time, stated "We have lectures, some very good, though usually graded to our limited intelligence". Some new officers were thrilled with delight and surprise when they found that many of their corporals were capable of reading a map, and even following out a route. We rapidly became much more efficient, and, though not exactly eager to become acquainted with front line conditions again, felt that when the time came, our operations would certainly be conducted with far greater competence than before. Developments continued, and the call came for volunteers for the new trench mortar companies; some of us decided that they wanted a change, and that nothing could be worse than to continue humping cylinders about, while others felt that it was best to hang on to what we already knew as our job rather than taking a step into something much worse. Which proved to be right? However, as a result of this, we bade farewell to some good men, and they departed on their new venture to billets at Pihem, on March 26th.

A minor but amusing diversion happened when a guard of which Cpls. Laycock and Rundle were members, set off a store of explosive in the guard room (a washhouse on the Wizernes road). These two corporals emerged minus eyebrows and moustaches, but the affair seems to have been hushed up, for no-one was "crimed" for it. For pleasant relief we were allowed to visit St. Omer, about a four-mile walk, and there was bathing in the little river Aa

close to the village as the weather became warmer.

Company drill led up to Battalion drill, which we performed with other Companies in the vicinity. This of course was all leading up to a Review of the "troops", which took place on Helfaut Common on May 22nd; there was a battalion route march via Wizernes to Helfaut cross-roads, where Col. Foulkes took the salute, and finishing up with a review of the whole Special Brigade on the Common. In one respect, this review was like most others; it was held on an exceptionally hot day, and many men collapsed with the heat. A few days later, the Company was out on night operations miles away from billets, when in the midst of heavy rain, sudden orders came for our return: another review was imminent, and we had only a few hours in which to clean up and prepare. On June 3rd, we were reviewed by the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, on Helfaut Common once more. For these noteworthy proceedings inspiration was provided by the Irish Guards Drum and Fife Band, kindly loaned for the occasion. We needed it, for although the weather was not so hot as on the previous occasion, we had risen at cock-crow, and were on the parade ground at 9:00 a.m.; the review took place at 2:00 p.m., so we were evidently considered to be hardened troops!

The Special Brigade was now ready for action. One or two men were fortunate to be granted leave, but on June 8th all further leave was stopped. The various Companies began to move towards their appointed places in the Line, in readiness for the great battle of the Somme. Our turn came on June 14th, when we bade farewell to our many Hallines friends, and marched to Wizernes, entraining in the customary vehicles labelled

"8 Chevaux, 40 Hommes". Ere long we sighted Bethune cathedral and concluded rightly that we were intending to operate in the same area as before. Marching from Béthune a mile or so South-Eastwards on the Arras road, we reached the small mining village of Verquigneul, a spot which was known to British troops as Minx. A large coal mine was still very active here, and we were billeted in its vicinity. At first, the new billets were by no means good, and we quickly made many improvements, though with their proximity to the mine, they could never be made really clean. The types of accommodation we obtained varied considerably. In the precincts of the mine yard one Section removed a considerable depth of ashes from a machine shed, and constructed comfortable beds. Cpl. Adcock, an exceptionally ingenious person, wired this shed for electric lighting and tapped the supply from the overhead cable in the yard; a huge brick fireplace was later erected for winter use; there is no need to state whence the necessary bricks and coal came. Another Section lived in the mine lamp-room for a time, but the constant traffic of miners forced them to move out and erect wooden huts of Heath Robinson design, though very comfortable, in the yard. Yet another Section occupied the engine room, where they were always assured of warm and dry conditions, and became oblivious to the perpetual noises of the machinery. A small cinema building housed another Section, while others occupied houses nearby. As the main Béthune-Arras road ran through the village, there was constant traffic to and from the Line, and we became spectators of many important troop movements in this area. The surrounding countryside diversified only by slag-heaps, was very drab and bare, the one direction of attraction being Bethune, as in the days of

186 Company.

Minx is not marked as such on French maps; probably it was a name coined by previous British soldiers, as a corruption of the French word "mines". Whatever the explanation, a large military notice at the cross-roads indicated "Minx". This place was to be the centre of our operations for many long months ahead, far longer than we contemplated when we first arrived. The billets here were the final ones on earth for a number of our comrades.

Although we were not aware of it at the moment, the Somme battle was due to commence on July 1st; though the main weight of the attack would be a considerable distance South of us, we were evidently to do our share in offensive operations, with the object of preventing the transfer of enemy troops from the Northern front to the centre of the battle, and also of doing as much damage to his forces as possible. Cylinder operations commenced on the third day after our arrival. Large numbers of "bojabs", now designated "rats" arrived in the mine yard, and we were on heavy fatigues stacking them ready for delivery.

Having permitted all miners in the vicinity to observe what was being done, we erected a temporary fence round the pile to ensure secrecy, and well guarded it. On the same evening the business of transporting to the Line began. Our Line positions were directly opposite Hulluch, a small village in the enemy lines just North of Loos. This was an appropriate spot for discharging gas, for here two months previously, the Germans had made a cloud gas attack against our troops, using phosgene and causing serious

casualties. It was learned later that the Germans had lost heavily themselves, owing to the cloud blowing back upon them. Our procedure on the present and several subsequent occasions involved conveying the cylinders in G.S. wagons to a forward dump, then by infantry carrying parties under our guidance to the required places in the front line, where parties of our men installed and protected them. When the G.S. wagons were loaded, they moved off through the main gate of the mine yard in an imposing procession, each with one of our men walking behind, to see that no trouble was caused by gas leaks, and to impart confidence to both drivers and horses, always suspicious about their load. The walk was a long one, passing through Noyelles and Philosophe and then on to Vermelles, past the church and up the Hulluch road, though we did not proceed beyond the village before dusk. The weather was very hot and dry, and our convoy raised a considerable cloud of dust en route. An enemy observation balloon high over the enemy lines looked down upon the scene, and one wondered when some shelling activity would commence. The forward dump was not exactly healthy as bullets were flying about, and the cylinders were lowered into the communication trenches as quickly as possible. The infantry carrying parties who were supposed to be "out on rest" found their job a heavy one, but the trenches were dry, and movement was reasonably quick. From the night when the first cylinders were in position, trench guards were maintained until all were clear again, to deal with leaks, and also to be ready for any emergency if cylinders were displaced or damaged by enemy action. A few days later, the weather changed and heavy rains resulted in the trenches becoming knee-deep in water. There was now much

enemy activity, and our movements were much harassed, among other things, by rifle grenades and aerial darts, which found the front line trench with unpleasant accuracy; several infantry were killed.

Our first attack was planned for June 25th, but after standing-to for several hours, it was postponed because of adverse wind conditions. On the night of June 27/28 conditions became eminently suitable, and the gas cloud was released at 1:00 a.m. There was quick retaliation, for the Germans were exceedingly nervy at this period, and movement was impossible for the next two hours. An infantry raid followed, carried out by the 10th Gordons, after which a stand-to was ordered as a German raid was now expected. Many of the Gordons were pulled back into our lines by us; it was on this occasion that Sgt. Kightly assisted in bringing in the wounded, and was later awarded the D.C.M. C Company casualties were light, though two men were killed, and some wounded. The dead were Cpl. Loxley and Par. Green. Information obtained later from prisoners and captured documents proved that our first attack had been successful, causing severe losses to the enemy. Thus C Special Company received its baptism of fire, and all ranks came through it with credit. The gas used was known to us as "White Star", and was actually a mixture of chlorine and phosgene in equal proportions. The chlorine acted as a propellant, without which the phosgene did not vaporise satisfactorily. Phosgene is a gas at least ten times as poisonous as chlorine, and in addition possesses a very formidable "delayed action"; even a very slight trace of it, often unnoticed at the time by the victim and consequently ignored, could cause sudden collapse and death up to two days after inhaling it. Evidence of this

effect upon a large number of the opposing troops was obtained later, but it was a matter of great regret that our authorities were also quite unaware of this deadly property, and casualties occurred among the Special Companies during its early use.

The new technique now employed by us resulted in excellent team work; each emplacement was in the charge of a corporal, with two or more pioneers to assist, so that the process of releasing the gas was much speeded up, an important essential when a barrage of 5.9s, etc., was liable to descend at any moment.

On July 1st the Somme battle opened, and cheering news of the British successes kept pouring in. Was a break-through about to take place? For our own part, further preparations were hastened, and all was ready for another discharge on July 2nd. The wind was unsatisfactory; smoke was released at 10:00 p.m., but tended to envelop us, rather than cross to the enemy lines. However, the Germans were certainly on the alert, and gave us a heavy shelling in reply, as well as prolonged machine gun and rifle fire, anticipating infantry attacks; our proceedings were cancelled just before midnight. On the night of July 5/6 wind conditions were good, and in conjunction with other Companies, our gas attack took place at 11:30 p.m. Once again there was instant retaliation, for red flares rose, calling for artillery help immediately, and with this we were soon acquainted. The enemy made increased use of whizzbangs which skimmed the parapet accurately, and blew pipes about; cylinders were buried, and sections of trench almost levelled. Sudden shelling came at intervals during the next three or four hours, but once more we escaped with few casualties. A

raiding party of the Scottish rifles went as far as the enemy front line, and found it in complete silence, indicating that the occupants had either retired from their positions or were seeking safety in their deep dugouts. On July 13th, Lt. Sewill was wounded and left us for a time, returning in September.

As a development of the great British offensive now proceeding, the Germans feared other large-scale attacks to the North, and were consequently taking precautions by persistent harassing fire in our area; this, added to the fact that we and neighbouring Special Companies had stirred matters up vigorously, caused them to be exceedingly spiteful towards our particular portion of the Front. Vermelles and Philosophie became very unhealthy places, especially after dusk when we were usually passing through.

During the rest of July and into early August we were occupied on trench fatigues, removing cylinders, and preparing for further attacks. Transport wagons stuck in shellholes, and machine gun bullets flew around, killing men and horses. Sgt. Kightley and Pnr. Holmes were wounded at an advanced dump. Damaged rail tracks and roads often delayed our work. Bethune was heavily shelled on August 7th.

Among the opposing trenches there was also increased mining activity, with either the Germans or our troops blowing up large mines at intervals under one another's front line. In this area, the sub-soil was chalk, and easily excavated. As the miners dumped all the material they removed around the top of the trench close to the mine-shaft entrance. Fritz could tell exactly where it was

and strafe it accordingly. Once when Cpl. F. was on trench guard he explored a mine-shaft out of interest, and proceeding 50 yds. or so found a mining R.E. on listening duty in an enlarged cave. Two large circular metal plates lay on the ground, and were connected by wires to the listener's ears. Suddenly the man jumped up, and handed the earphones to our Cpl. What did the Cpl. think? Yes, there was certainly a steady and distinct tapping noise; apparently the Germans had a mine close to ours. Telling the Cpl. to remain and see what happened, the other rushed off to inform his officer. The scene was unforgettable: two or three candles revealing the extent of the cave, in complete isolation from the war and the outer world above, except for the persistent ghostly tapping. Lifting his eyes, the Cpl. saw a message scrawled in large letters upon the white wall. Had they been put there by someone who scoffed or someone who believed? for the words were "God is Love"!

Raids were frequent on both sides when mines were blown up, and it was probably this exceptional disturbance which troubled the rats, for at one period near the end of July, there were literally thousands of them among the trenches, and it was difficult to protect any rations; it was a common experience when on guard to hear them playing leap-frog down the dugout steps and to welcome them with a revolver shot at the bottom. Enemy snipers were extremely active, and small lookout mirrors fixed up by sentries on the parapets to observe No Man's Land were shot to bits many times in one morning. It was still the days of no steel helmets, though we were being supplied with them as quickly as possible. Wild flowers bloomed profusely in the wasted fields, and formed colourful fringes to the tops of our trenches.

The most abundant were poppies, marguerites and cornflowers, red, white, and blue. How appropriate was the choice of a Flanders poppy as the symbol of remembrance after the war! for they flourished over and beautified the graves of our dead. A fragment of poetry, by someone unknown, is vividly called to mind and brings back poignant memories of the summer of 1916:

"They are blooming at Loos, in the summer heat,
'Mid the shattered house and the shell-torn
street,
By the broken Cross and the pierced feet;
Poppy, cornflower, marguerite!"

Preparations being completed on August 14th, we were ready for another attack, but on four successive nights the wind was unfavourable and we stood-to in vain. During one of these we were subjected to heavy mortar fire, and Lt. Richards was wounded, along with a number of infantry. On August 20th, the wind favoured us, and at zero hour, 10:30 p.m. we quickly turned on. No reply came for the first ten minutes, then we experienced much machine gun fire and H.E. Two pioneers were killed, Bulmer and Curtis, and Sgt. Harrison and Pnrs. Penton and Sharp died of wounds next day; several others were wounded or gassed. A large mine was blown up by our troops later during the night, followed by a pig raid by the Rifle Brigade. This proved disastrous and we witnessed some appalling sights in our trenches on the following morning.

From this time onwards and through September the routine of trench work continued, and we became very familiar with the villages behind our

front. The small mining village of Philosophe was on the main Béthune-Lens road, about two miles West of Loos, and no traffic was allowed beyond it during daylight. The coal mine, railway station, and all the houses were in ruins. One garden attached to a small villa must have been quite beautiful in its day; now the villa was a heap of rubble, the garden walls levelled in many places, and along what had once been a rose-walk, there was a row of graves of French soldiers, with battered cavalry helmets surmounting the wooden crosses, bearing the words "Mort pour son patri, 1914". Particularly dangerous was the cross roads via which Vermelles was approached. The road to the latter village ran roughly parallel to the Line, and was a favourite spot for our artillery positions. When the Germans concentrated on these, as they frequently did, it became an unpleasant road to travel, and our convoys were often held up for several hours because of this. Vermelles had been the scene of bitter fighting in 1914, when the village changed hands several times in the struggle for possession of the best vantage points as the opposing armies spread rapidly Northwards to the coast. Now it was a scene of utter ruin, and there were numerous graves of the French and German cavalry who had clashed here. The church was in ruins, though most of the tower still remained in a precarious condition, providing a useful observation post. Close by, our communication trenches commenced leading up Railway Alley and the Le Rutoir Alley to the front.

Back at Billets, each Section prepared its own sets of connecting pipes, 4-ways, 3-ways, and the like. On this job a knowledge of chemistry was far less valuable than some practical acquaintance with plumbing, and brute strength was

to be preferred to academic knowledge.

Lt. Nye, who had been an officer in 186 Company, now joined us from A Company, and became second in command, taking the place of Lt. White who was transferred. Lt. Sewill rejoined us from hospital soon afterwards.

Our next venture was the preparation for another gas attack early in October, and the intention was to make it the biggest yet attempted by a single Company. We had now installed no less than 2,500 cylinders of phosgene in the front line, to the South of our previous positions, and this gas was to be discharged in three waves. Everyone was intensely keen, and all details for the actual operation were carefully prepared, so that every man knew exactly what was required of him. Some of those who took part in this attack still retain the actual chit supplied to them, giving the three secret zero hours. There were no delays on this occasion. During the afternoon of Oct. 5th, we moved up to our positions, and having made all ready, awaited the hour of the attack. Wind conditions were perfect, Westerly at about 4 m.p.h. The zero hours were 8:00 p.m., 8:45 p.m., and 10:30 p.m., and each wave was dispatched successfully in its turn. In each emplacement, a definite number of cylinders were allotted for each wave; a total of 900 constituted the first wave, about 550 in the second, and 1050 in the last. The total weight of "White Star" gas was about 80 tons, and to thicken up the discharges, smoke candles were thrown over when each wave had begun. We had been anticipating heavy retaliation after the first wave, but to our surprise there was very little, and we were able to prepare for the next wave in comparative comfort. Many enemy flares went up as usual, but

the feeble opposition soon died away. The night was fairly light, and it was an eerie experience to stand up looking across to the German trenches, watching them enveloped in dense clouds of smoke and gas. After the last wave had finished, a vast area of enemy ground lay under this deadly blanket, which slowly drifted away towards the East. Beyond No Man's Land seemed to be a land of the dead. A raiding party of the Devons went across, accompanied by some volunteers from our ranks, among them Cpl. Whitlaw and Pnr. Naylor, but at first there was too much gas about, and the men returned, going out again later. The actual raid was not a success, due to some bungling by those in charge, and severe casualties were caused by some surviving enemy machine gunners. Of our people, Pnr. Naylor was killed and a number slightly gassed. But information which was obtained much later by our Intelligence confirmed the general opinion that this attack had been highly successful and it has been claimed as one of the most successful cloud attacks of the war. The brunt of it was borne by a reserve division, which had been sent to this quieter section of the Line for a rest from the Somme battle, and now suffered severe losses. Casualties were caused as far back as 10 Kms. and vegetation was destroyed even further back still.

It was learned too that the Germans were still not thoroughly aware of the dangers of phosgene, and many died as a result of the exertion caused by walking back to their billets. For us, the remainder of the night was deathly quiet, and no enemy activity either by infantry or artillery could be aroused for the next two days.

After a short rest, we were occupied on

trench work again, removing cylinders under bad weather conditions and increased enemy activity; all this made us feel we were back to normal life once more. During November we became well acquainted with an infantry trench mortar section which fired from a position in Boyau 68 in our Hulluch sector. The men lived in a dugout close by, and stored a supply of bombs there. Our trench guards often watched them at their work. One night while the occupants of the dugout were sleeping, cinders falling from a brazier set the woodwork on fire. Exploding detonators increased the danger, and more men were hurriedly brought up to assist in extinguishing the blaze. In spite of their heroic efforts however, the fire reached the store of bombs which blew up with a terrific explosion. More than twenty men were killed, several of them being blown to bits, and fragments of their bodies and clothing were found hundreds of yards away. The huge crater which was produced blocked the route to the front line, and necessitated the digging of a new stretch of trenches.

Christmas duly arrived, and we did our best to relax over the celebration of Section dinners in various estaminets. By this time we were well acquainted with the civilians, and they became very kindly disposed to us, so that here, as elsewhere, we had become quite at home!

During the past hectic months, life had been made bearable by the enlivening and amusing incidents which occurred at some time or other to most individuals; some of them were only known to a favoured few, while others gave delight to the whole Company. Lt. Armstrong was reconnoitring the line one night accompanied by Gpls. Bladwell and Clibbens, both of the latter (wearing

big rounded spectacles, and looking like Bosches. Watched with suspicion by infantry sentries, it only needed someone to note that the supposed R.E. officer was wearing D.L.I. badges, whereas that famous regiment was miles away. All three were arrested and marched down to Company H.Q. where they spent some uncomfortable hours until identified. Cpl. Joyce often distinguished himself; he was big, tenacious, unperturbable and conscientious to a fault; he was determined to shorten the war if only by a day. On one occasion when in charge of a trench guard, he came across a large dump of food near the front line, and he and his unlucky pioneers burdened themselves with as much as they could carry, struggling with heavy sandbags of it all the way back to billets. It was presented to the Q.M. stores. Shortly afterwards, it became known that someone had robbed the front line infantry of their reserve of iron rations. At the Christmas dinner of Section 13, Cpl. Joyce received a suitable medal for winning from the infantry. At another time, the same corporal was leading a carrying party up the line at night, and met a sentry in the support trench, who immediately challenged the leading figure. With his cropped head, Joyce resembled a typical Bosche in his trench gear. For the moment, Joyce refrained from answering, since we ought to have been well-known, whereupon the nervous sentry fired, missing Joyce, but putting a bullet through the cheek of a pioneer close behind.

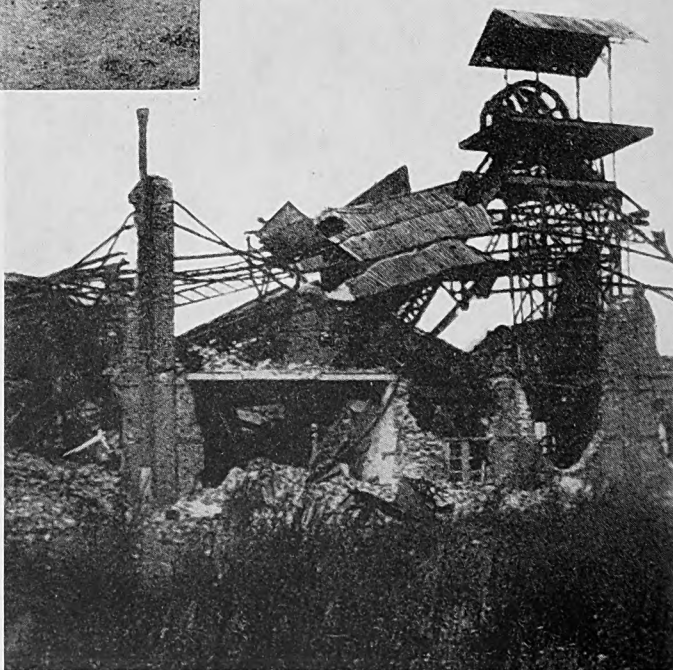
Lt. Kent-Jones on one occasion was taking an infantry working party up with cylinders, and they seemed almost too tired to do the heavy task before them, under the present condition of the trenches. The orders were that there should be no halt once the men had got the cylinders upon their shoulders. K.J. led the way, but after about half an hour's



HELFAUT CHURCH.

1914-15-16
Paris

VERMELLES (P.-de-C.)
La fosse n° 3 bombardée.



VERMELLES.
RUINS OF FOSSE 3,
1916.

tramp he came to the conclusion, that in spite of Division's instructions, the men must have a spell. On passing back the word to halt, there was the usual sound of cylinders being dropped in the mud. The working party were too tired to speak, but after a period of silence one of them quietly started to whistle. This brought forth a remark from one of the others, "Don't whistle, Bill, or he will think we are bloody happy!"

During another "carry-in", an officer of high rank who seldom saw a trench, came along the front line. The men carrying were not particularly quiet, and were cursing the war in general, and the Special Brigade in particular. Speaking in a hoarse whisper, he emphasised that everybody else must do the same, for he told them that the Germans had installed listening posts near our trenches, and could pick up every word we said. At once the loud comment came from someone in the dark: "Anything we bloody well talk about, won't help the bastards much!"

Sgt. Hill, of Section 14, was a man who was quick in the uptake, and could always supply a ready answer. Very late one night he entered one of our shacks with company orders; the men were under their blankets, and ready for sleep. Pnr. Winn called out "What b - man is that?" and was taken aback when the reply came like a shot, with the appropriate quotation "This is the sergeant, who like a good and hardy soldier fought!"

Little Sgt. Turton is well remembered. He had served in the Boer War, being the only one among us to display the ribbons of that campaign. The military complexion of 186 Company must have appalled him, but he survived to serve with C Company, and did his best to forgive us. He was

famous for his extremely shiny boots, and always kept an extra pair ready for use. Thus when his Section 17 paraded on the morning after a dirty night in the Line, his flashing boots were certainly conspicuous in contrast to our mud-bespattered footwear. Having given smartly the command "Section 'shun," there followed his usual comment, "Now you fellows want to clean your boots like mine;" which of course we didn't!

Lt. Richards, polite and sympathetic on all occasions, was always exceptionally so to his sergeant, the dapper Sgt. Turton. Thus, arriving to take morning parade to the dung-heap in a farmyard at Hallines, the sergeant's spectacular salute was acknowledged by a very friendly one. A matey liaison having been established, the conversation then proceeded something after the following fashion ---- "Good morning, sergeant!-- "Good morning, sir; a lovely morning!" --- "Yes, it is, sergeant, isn't it?" (Lt. Richards looking round to see if the morning was really lovely) ---- "Birds singing, sir, a good sign, sir!" ---- "Yes, are they? a very good sign; now we'd better get on. Have you got two good and very reliable corporals? I want them to draw twelve shovels from the Q. M. Stores!"

When the New Year arrived there were no rousing speeches to inflame us to further efforts. But a spirit of optimism prevailed, though the war conditions in general did not tend to the belief in a speedy end to hostilities. There was still a long, long trail ahead.

CHAPTER FOUR

1917--THE YEAR OF TRIBULATION

The year 1917 was heralded by bitter wintry weather, which commenced early in January. The cold became more and more intense and these severe conditions continued without a break for many weeks. It was the coldest winter since the time of the great frost of 1895. A bitter East wind swept across Europe, and its direction precluded any opportunity for us to continue our cloud attacks.

Preparations, however, proceeded for a time, and a large number of cylinders were carried up and installed. We were now working on new positions at the North end of the Loos salient near Hill 70. Instead of going up via Vermelles we negotiated the ill-famed cross-roads at Philosophe, and proceeded Eastwards past Fosse 3 and Fosse 7 up the Lens road. At "Suicide Corner" we turned North into Loos village, where the cylinders were unloaded at Crucifix Dump. This was a very unhealthy region at any time of day or night, being constantly swept by enemy fire. On this occasion the cylinders employed were of a small type known as "mice" to distinguish them from the full-sized "rats". They only weighed 50 lbs. when full and hence could be carried by one man, using a convenient sling to support it on ones back. The contents were phosgene. While

they were not suitable for a large-scale attack, we hoped to make suitable use of them for local attacks, assisting raids, etc. One advantage was that they could be carried-in immediately prior to a "stunt", thus avoiding the risk of damage which was always imminent when cylinders had to remain in the front line for a considerable time. Our "mice" were stored in dugouts in the reserve lines. Actually, owing to bad weather conditions, they had to remain unused for a very long period, but were quite safe, whereas large cylinders would undoubtedly have caused trouble.

A light railway, often badly shattered, ran from Philosophie at "Kingsbridge Station" up to Loos, and we often followed this track down when homeward bound. It was supposed to be a short cut, but the going was rough, and very risky on pitch-black nights, apart from machine gun spraying. One recalls a long communication trench in the Loos salient, which ran roughly North to South; it had been part of the German front line before the Loos battle. It could be, and frequently was, enfiladed from both ends. We knew it as O.G.I.

One might trek back by road all the way, or with luck get a lift on a G.S. horsed waggon galloping back in the early hours. On one occasion, a moonlight night, some of us saw such a waggon coming, and raced to jump on it as it passed; clinging to the sides as we clambered in, we were horrified to find that it contained dead bodies, jumping and jerking about as the vehicle swayed along over the rough road; it was truly a "dead man's ride".

The snow lay thick for weeks, and the well trodden tracks to the trenches became plainly

visible to the enemy, who was thus very much assisted in the harassing of troop movements. One supposes that it was the same on his side, but that thought did not comfort us much. At times the sight of even one or two men passing along brought forth a shell or two. At other times, there was no evidence of life on either side. Trench guards for the cylinders continued, and conditions for the men so engaged were very harsh. The ground was much too hard for any attempt at digging. Most of the infantry were withdrawn to various strong points, and our guards were isolated. Water was a big problem, for it froze while being carried. At one time, the only place to procure it was at the bottom of a deep dugout of which the steps were a mass of ice, and where one chased away a number of swimming rats before filling the dixie; needless to say, we boiled the water well. Again at odd times like this, our lorries refused to function, and those on line duty went short of rations. During this long cold spell, many otherwise honest and upright soldiers yielded to the temptation to scrounge from the stocks in the mine yard. The scrounging reached such a degree that it became obvious to the mine manager, who estimated the amount which had disappeared, and sent the bill to our O.C. Capt. Davies promptly paraded the Company, and, breathless with indignation, lectured us on the iniquity of scrounging, concluding with the words: "And if any of you pinch any more coal, for God's sake don't let me see you". A company order was also issued. "Anyone caught stealing coal in daylight will be severely punished". It was often said that our "Skipper" always took a fatherly interest in his men, and this was certainly an instance of it. A quotation from a pioneer's diary of this period reveals to what extent the cold had sapped our morale ---- "Jan. 28. Sunday --- went to church

--- came back --- then ten of us made a raid on the mine yard and pinched coal! No names, no packdrill!

During February large stocks of cylinders arrived, and were stored at a big dump behind the mine slag-heap. But the wind was persistently East or North and there were no opportunities for an attack. We had no desire to attempt "turning on" under such conditions. Some route marching kept us fit. Cpl. Jones, of the Orderly Room, organised a choir which met frequently at an estaminet and enlivened the evenings with song, though as far as is known, the choir never functioned in public. On the last day of the month Section 14, for some obscure reason, carried out a small gas discharge, assisted by men from other sections. It was evidently a quiet and select affair, soon over and no casualties. But relics of odd occasions are still prized by their owners. Here for instance, a creased and soiled scrap of paper which reads thus: "28.2.17. Bay 14, 24 rats; Bay 15, 36 rats; Cpl. Dalton, Pnrs. Capern, Simmons, Wiseman, Brown, Orwin! Only a Special R.E. can grasp the significance of it!

A crowd of new men came to swell our ranks, probably some time in February. They were mostly an R.F.A. draft, or so we termed them. Apropos of this, there was an over hasty appraisalment of the new arrivals as they marched into Minx billets. One jaded corporal of ours gazed at them, and spoke to another, equally disenchanted. "We have heard about war bastards, we have read about them; now here they are!" They were certainly a tough-looking and tough-acting batch, but they soon settled in with us, and were found to be hard workers, ready to rough it at all times. There were some excellent men among them, of whom Pnr.

Chapple was typical, upright, loyal and steadfast, men to admire. There were wild but goodhearted fellows like that incorrigible and inseparable pair Farrell and Coste (Liverpool lads), whose favourite amusement was to drop live ammunition into the lighted billet stove!

During February the Company marched to Saily Labourse ("Sally's the boys") for a lecture on War Loan, and all ranks were exhorted to contribute to this patriotic effort. This was considered very funny, because although most of us had some slight interest in winning the war, there were not many of our number who were particularly interested in paying for it as well.

On the night of March 2nd/3rd the majority of the Company went up for a smoke attack which took place at 4:00 a.m., in conjunction with a successful infantry raid. The wind was not good and there was little reply from the enemy. Early in this month, a number of men were recalled to England for special work on munitions, and Sgts. Jones, Heasman, Hall and Clements, and Cpls. Cross, Clibbens and Holroyd said farewell to us. The last named set off among great excitement from his pals, and carried an extra boot in his pack and a large horseshoe in his ration bag, of which he was oblivious for some hours. Lt. Kent-Jones conducted a small party of men back to Wizernes, where they underwent training with the new "projector" type of gun on Bilques Common. This gun was later to become one of the chief weapons used by the Special Brigade for firing gas drums on to the enemy lines. A new device was now put into use to help the installation of cylinders. Boxes constructed in the form of a strong framework were made, and dug into positions beneath the firesteps in the front line to provide accommodation for two

cylinders per box. This box scheme enabled us to place the cylinders well below ground level, while at the same time the surrounding earth was held in position, making it much easier to move cylinders in or out as necessary. When well sand-bagged, only an experienced eye would detect their presence. A personally alarming incident happened in the case of Cpl. F. who had been notified just prior to going up one night that he would henceforth hold the exalted rank of sergeant. Having been informed that he must at once wear three stripes, he procured a third one, and with a safety pin added it to the two already on his sleeve. His first job that night was to check the numbers and positions of the cylinders already in place, to which end he went blithely along the trench, nodding to the sentry on the firestep, and then peering mysteriously underneath as he made his count; he then disappeared round the corner, and did exactly the same thing in the next bay. The infantry were new to our part of the line, and suspicious of spies. Soon the new sergeant noticed someone following him close behind with a gleaming bayonet, but carried on with his job. The number of followers grew, until one suddenly rushed past him, and blocked the way. His attendants then demanded to know what the game was, but his attempts at an explanation were futile, for he was disreputably dressed, and with a third stripe pinned on him. There was no alternative but to be conducted, with bayonets unpleasantly close, to Company H.Q. and one of the R.E. Officers was sent for. Being recognised as "one of us", all ended well, but the incident was alarming while it lasted.

About the middle of the month wintry conditions changed, and a thaw resulted in trenches filled with melting snow and mud. Trenches

collapsed in many places, making the line work an agony. At such times, we took risks in proceeding over the top as much as possible. There was one short cut homewards from the support trench at Essex Lane, and Fritz knew of this also. He whizz-banged it at intervals throughout the night. But the shelling was timed with such regularity, a common feature of enemy artillery fire, that we were able to use the track. One waited for a salvo of shells to come over, and then a small party moved off. After the next volley a second party went, and so on. No-one was hit, but everyone did record time down that track.

The Vimy Ridge attacks, then proceeding, caused increased activity all along our front, the neighbouring villages receiving their share also. At last came the opportunity for a gas discharge, and to get rid of our "mice". On the night of April 16/17 we prepared for this, but as there had been a futile infantry attack by our troops the previous morning, the Germans were shelling everywhere and everything. The mice were carried from the reserve line store, about 600 yds. to the attack positions, each man making two journeys. Conditions made progress slow and uncomfortable. One batch of men, each with a cylinder of phosgene on his back, had a narrow escape when a shell dropped on the parados within a few feet of them as they crouched down waiting orders to move on. It spun and hissed devilishly for a few awful moments, and then skidded over the sandbags to travel further, where it finally exploded in reserve line. The gas discharge took place at 2:00 a.m., in conjunction with another raid. We suffered the loss of two killed and nine wounded a day later, when Loos was heavily shelled. Other work we were doing enabled us to be ready very soon for further cylinder attacks, though we never

employed "mice" again. About this time, April 22nd, the enemy gave us a doze of phosgene in return, this being fired over by their artillery. The whole area from Loos to Philosophie was drenched with the gas. Cpl. "Taffy" Hughes and Pnr. Ireland were badly wounded on the way down, the latter dying of his wounds, and several men were gassed.

We were now "standing to" each day and went up on the night of April 27/28. Zero hour was midnight, with a suitable Westerly breeze. Lt. "K.J." with Section 11 was responsible for the greatest share of the proceedings, but the whole attack was on a large scale, being linked up with cylinder and projector discharges by other Companies. More use was now being made of a light railway, and truck loads of cylinders were pulled up the long incline to the forward dump by mules. There were times when these animals did their job quickly and well, and there were times when they certainly acted as the most perverse animals in nature. All would be proceeding to schedule, the trucks running smoothly, mules well on the scent, and the accompanying R.E.s smiling in the calm of the moonlight night. But just when they were anticipating a speedy completion of the night's task, there would be a sudden crash as the leading truck jumped a shattered rail. The mule would rear and lash out in panic, and while its driver chased and calmed it, the R.E.s, no longer smiling, would collect the scattered cylinders, and re-load the truck. When the driver had finished addressing his mule, away we went again, and the same performance was often repeated several times enroute. Even at the dump, trouble could arise. A shell dropping too near would produce panic again, and this time the mule would take its homeward way at top speed, with

the driver disappearing after it. However, sooner or later, the last load was delivered, with mules or without, and final preparations were completed. The next attack, arranged as usual for a Sunday night, was a "washout" due to the wind, but on the following night, May 14/15, we returned to the line, to find that our positions had been heavily dosed with tear-gas. Was Fritz expecting us again?

Other Companies were to fire projectors on our flanks. Prior to the attack Sgts. "Paddy" Burke and Smith were wounded, and Sgt. Garside was sent across to Section 15 front. Zero hour was 1:00 a.m. and though the wind dropped somewhat, it was still strong enough to carry the gas across. A diary records:

"First enemy rocket at Z + 2 minutes; machine guns at Z + 4: Whizzbangs, mortars and aerial darts at Z + 7; bombardment very severe for two hours, with hundreds of aerial darts! These darts were vicious missiles, so constructed as to produce the maximum number of fragments on exploding, and there is no doubt that on this occasion they were meant for our personnel. Pnrs. Foley and Pyne were killed instantly, the latter while helping to carry out Sgt. Smith; Cpl. Catto and Pnrs. Hardy and Johnson were badly wounded. This was one of the worst nights we had experienced for a long time, but the dawn came in glorious splendour, and Wingles Tower could be observed through the rising mists. A German plane flew very low over our lines, to detect the exact positions from which the gas had come. We trudged back over the open from Hay Alley. From the tumbled ground between O.G.I. and O.B.I. a lark soared up, disclosing a nest with four eggs. It was always interesting to

note signs of bird life in the barren land thick with gun-pits. A day or two later, Sgt. Hill was lucky enough to discover a partridge nest containing 18 eggs at the bottom of a shell-hole, and carried them safely back to billets in his "tin-hat".

Our cylinder operations were now in full swing, and everyone had become well experienced in the manifold duties involved, as well as knowledgeable with regard to the vagaries of trench conditions, German opposition and the all important wind. The work continued steadily throughout the changing fortunes of another year, and no opportunity was lost to carry out our gas offensive operations. How vividly the routine preparations and the ensuing experiences connected with a cloud gas attack come to mind! There has been a short spell of relaxation and rest after our previous strafe; we have removed most of the mud from our uniforms and generally cleaned up; there have been passes to Béthune, a look at the shops and the enjoyment of a meal of "oeufs et pommes de terre frite" at our favourite cafe.

Our little world is peaceful and we lie around our billets in the warm sunshine, chatting lazily. Suddenly a dispatch rider rushes into view, seeking C Company Orderly Room. An hour or so later various officers are seen on the move, disappearing up the line; our "Skipper Davies" goes hurtling off in the box-car, in the way only Dvr. Huntley can drive it, taking the corners on two wheels. A cylinder dump is inspected and checks are made. Very soon we get the news; another attack imminent to help some raid or other. We are warned for the trenches that very evening, "carrying-in". At dusk the whole Company parades in the mine-yard, and, though not attractively dressed, we each know what suits us

best when on the job, especially if we know there is water about. Lorries carry us as far as the railway station at Philisophe, sections vying with each other as to which can produce the most cheerful songs en route. Then parties set off speedily across the plain to drop into O.G. I., Tenth Avenue, and proceed to the front trench positions to prepare their positions and await the arrival of cylinders. Or trucks are loaded up at "Kingsbridge Stn" as quickly as possible and escorted along the light railway to reserve dump. The night is dry, the air fresh, and the line quiet for a time; only the occasional chatter of a machine gun, or the crack of a rifle and whine of a bullet fairly near, break the silence. Perhaps for once the railway behaves well, and the dump is soon reached. Some men, fortunate or otherwise, have been detached as guides, and wait for their carrying parties to arrive; these are most probably the P.B.I. "out for a rest", but on occasion they might be men from a cavalry regiment who have had to leave their horses awhile to do some horsework themselves. None of them of course welcome the job. The Officer in charge of the carriers at last reports with his men. This part of the line is quite new to him, and he hangs on to his guide, enquiring fervently if the latter is sure of his way, and how far it is. The procession is made up, cylinders lashed to poles, with two men and a third if lucky, deputed to each. They disappear into the trench, slowly at first but much more hurriedly as a stray 5.9 drops near. The guide moves steadily and confidently forward, sounds of profanity reaching him from behind; he usually learns at least one new word on each occasion. There are holes and bad corners to negotiate, and the heavy and awkward load is a trial; word is passed up for that "b--- in front to go slower". At times a rest is

essential and the guide struggles back to the end of the party to see if all is well; somebody wants to know "How many more b-- miles is it?" or from a facetious one: "Are you going to gas b-- Berlin?"

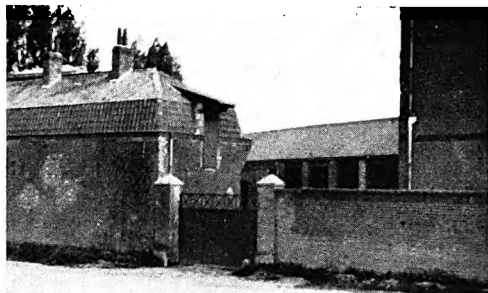
The front line is reached at last, and among a good deal of congestion the cylinders are installed. At this moment an enemy mortar opens up for its usual nightly strafe, and the carrying party is too eager to disappear; we tell them it is one of ours. At last the quota of cylinders is in place, and the order to move off comes through. No time is lost by us, but now it is the early hours, and Fritz is alert for gas. Things become lively, the front area gets a dose of whizz-bangs, and the communication trenches down which we are hastening feel much too low and much too straight for protection; there is a smell of explosives where a shell has found the trench. Soon we are going back over the plain, past our gun-pits which are now winking and flashing as our artillery wakes up; the path of some of our own shells is too close for comfort. So to billets once more, and no one wide enough awake to sing. Often there is someone missing on our return, for a chance shell or bullet has caused casualties, and these lads disappear via advanced dressing station to base hospital, and we see many of them no more. On following nights similar work continues, in wet conditions and dry, experiencing remarkably quiet occasions in contrast to sudden "strafing", though the inference that "Jerry has the wind up" is usually true. There is a further preparation of pipe connections, the allotment of corporals and pioneers to their particular emplacements, and finally the anxious wait for a favourable wind. Each day it is now a matter of "standing by"; the smoke rising from the tall mine chimney is

watched by all, for its direction indicates what is likely to happen that night. During the afternoon it is seen to blow steadily from the West, bring the comment "We're up tonight, lads!" The forecast is true and dusk finds us on our way. In silence, the connections are made, and we hope the attack is on. But the wind at this later hour is falling away, and veering round; the order comes along "Wash-out, pack up." and our work has been in vain. But at last, the night comes when wind conditions remain satisfactory. At each emplacement a home-made wind vane is fixed on the parapet, and watched carefully as zero hour approaches. Some corporals boast of fanciful bits of apparatus to gauge the wind direction, but most put their faith in a strand of sacking on a length of wire. The protecting sandbags are removed, exposing the tops of the cylinders in their boxes; the caps are screwed off silently, valves tested, and connecting pipes carefully adjusted. Parapet pipes are placed in a handy position ready for throwing over; spanners are ready to hand. We work noiselessly, lest the least sound in the clear night air should be heard by the enemy and bring down trouble upon us. A final check is made and the report given "all ready" as the section officer completes his rounds and synchronizes our watches carefully. We are informed of zero hour, and hope there will be no further frustration.

The wind keeps steady, due West, 4 miles per hour; half an hour to go. The front is comparatively peaceful; occasionally the crack of a sniper's rifle; a Verey light soars up from the enemy lines and illumines No Man's Land as it falls towards us. It burns in white brilliance on our parapet, disclosing a group of men, tense, motionless, silent; then the blackness

returns. Each man is occupied with his own thoughts, wondering what will happen when we "turn on". Now the sergeant hurries along his section, warning us to be ready, and, when we turn on, to keep low. Respirators are adjusted, and we await the critical moment.

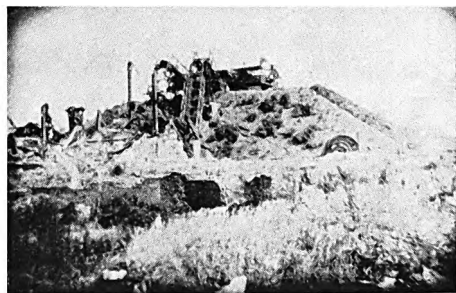
It is zero. Parapet pipes are quickly flung over, and sandbagged in position, while the corporal in charge stands on the firestep to control them, and to watch how the gas goes over. The pioneers turn on quickly and the gas hisses out viciously, the wind carrying the rapidly forming cloud steadily across to the enemy trenches. Our whole front is now active and the moving poisonous cloud makes an unforgettable sight. A few moments later, red rockets rise from several places in the German line, giving warning of gas, and calling for artillery retaliation, and suddenly all hell is let loose. Whizz-bangs by the score skim the parapets, and shower earth and fragments of metal into our trenches; the air reeks with the smell of explosives; parapet pipes are flung back into the trench, and have to be put out again; there is gas in the trench. Turning on is now completed, and we "hang on" waiting until the cylinders are completely discharged. Heavier stuff is now beginning to come over, and registers along our front line; terrific explosions are followed by the hiss of flying bits of shell. Soon trench mortar fire opens from a flank and "Minnies" or "pineapples" come across; their "crump" sounds very ominous, and the ground rocks at our feet. Here and there is an almost direct hit, the trench is blown in, cylinders buried, and the crew badly shaken; parts of the front line become impassable. But by now, we are able to find some sort of cover or protection; the deep slit of a traverse is comparatively safe.



ENTRANCE TO
THE CHICORY FACTORY
NEAR BETHUNE.



PHILOSOPHE, 1918.
SHOWING THE
BETHUNE—LENS ROAD.



THE SLAGHEAP, AT LOOS,
AFTER SEPT. 25TH, 1915.



EXERCISE WITH
P. H. HELMETS,
HELFAUT, 1915.

If very fortunate, there may be a good dug-out near. Word comes along that someone has been hit, and helping hands go out. The Section Officer, somewhat more breathless than before, having encountered a number of enemy blasts en route, visits us to get our report, and "blasts" himself round to the next bay. He has to run the gauntlet of fire for the whole length of his section, and then make a risky journey back to Company H.Q. dugout somewhere in reserve line to despatch his report. Our artillery is now responding, and the duel continues for a long time; if an infantry raid is on, machine gun fire adds to the racket, and soon news comes of success or failure.

At long last, enemy fire dies down, and we scramble from cover to pack up. This is barely done, when the barrage descends again. There is another long wait, but at last the pipes trailing gas are carried back to store in Support Trench. Emplacements are sand-bagged safely, and at last permission is given to depart. No time is lost, but somehow the Germans sense our movements, and the going out is bad. Only when the lorries are reached far back, do we feel that another attack is safely over. Finally, there is the return to billets in a state of exhaustion, followed by hours of blissful sleep. Later, we gather more detailed information of the good or bad luck each section has had, and we learn with sorrow of our casualties.

Each individual had his full share of experiences and amazing escapes, each had his good or bad luck. On one occasion an emplacement crew chose cover in a comfortable looking shelter under the parapet, and sat blissfully through a

long bombardment; only when daylight came did they realise that their overhead protection had been a sheet of corrugated iron, with a few boards on top. Pnr. Winn still recalls his first experience of the line when the enemy put over a heavy shrapnel barrage. An Irish regiment was in occupation, and our pioneer was watching the fireworks when a hand pulled him under what appeared to be a surface shelter and a rich Irish voice said: "Come under here, lad; it's as safe as houses, bedad". But when dawn came, the shelter was seen to be merely a waterproof sheet, stretched across the corner of the trench.

During the winter months a stretcher-bearer party was organised from our own ranks, for previously we had depended upon the assistance of the infantry in any part of the line where we might chance to be working. Cpl. Cowlshaw was in command of the party, which soon proved its efficiency. These men often had a difficult task to perform, but always carried out their duties with great coolness, and were able to deal promptly with casualties. Thus they were the means of alleviating the suffering so frequently caused by enemy action as well as our own gas.

In the early part of the year, actually in March, the Special Companies were re-organised to the extent that each Company now consisted of five sections, instead of six. This probably happened during the period when the High Command was short of troops, and infantry brigades, etc. were all being reduced in number. Thus with A and B Companies being allotted Sections 1 to 10, C Company followed with Sections 11 to 15. Our re-shuffle worked out thus:- Section 11 from

Section 18, under Lt. Hemens; Section 12 from 17 under Lt. Grantham; Section 13 unchanged under Lt. Kent-Jones; Section 14 unchanged under Lt. Hopkins; and Section 15 under Lt. Armstrong. Sgt. Alderson had recently received a commission in the Company, and had been in charge of Section 16 for a time. This was apparently the organisation when Section photographs were taken at Verquin in July.

The "Boutilier episode" is vividly remembered. It took place on May 27th, at the evening parade for the line. Our C.S.M. Badger was in charge of the parade, and the Company was ordered to "fall in". Pnr. Boutilier, a Newfoundland lad, was acting as Lt. Hemens' batman, and was present with the Officer's bicycle, to hand it over to him on arrival. The C.S.M. barked out the order again to Boutilier, who was still standing aside. Whereupon Boutilier went forward and struck the C.S.M. violently on the face. C.Q.M.S. Moss tried to intervene, and Cpl. Mortimer rushed forward, realising the seriousness of the matter, and immobilised Boutilier by wrapping his arms around him. The offender was immediately put under arrest, and at the subsequent court-martial received 10 years penal servitude. Capt. Davies worked hard to get the sentence reduced to 2 years, to be served at the end of the war. Boutilier returned to the Company, and did line duty with us. Later on, he was awarded the M.M., the sentence was squashed and everyone felt happy. C. S. M. Badger left us for another Company, and was replaced by Sgt. Martini. A list of senior N.C.O.s with us in July 1917 will doubtless revive many memories: C.S.M. Martini, C.Q.M.S. Moss, Sgts. Burrows, Chester, Fox, Garside, Gorley, Hill, Kightley, Marsland, Sharp, Turton, Whitlow

and Wilde. Cpl. Harman was promoted to Sergeant later in the year. Cpls. Brindley and Samwell obtained commissions and departed to other Companies. C.Q.M.S. Moss was commissioned to another Company, and also Cpl. Bladwell to another R.E. unit. Both of the latter were later killed, and Lt. Moss received a posthumous award for his gallantry when resisting the German advance on the Somme in 1918.

So our work went on, and this period was probably the hardest of all we had so far known. The enemy was seriously concerned about the frequency and deadliness of the gas attacks in this area, for, as well as our cloud gas operations, other Companies were doing the same thing, or firing projectors. Hence the Germans not only put the forward trenches under heavy fire, but paid special attention to our forward dumps. Machine gun fire was very active at night with the intention of catching our carrying-parties, while working on further cylinder installation. Pnr. Gordon was killed, and Cpl. Winfield wounded. For an interlude, Cpl. Harman, who was later awarded the M.M., and Cpl. Brown duly blackened their faces and otherwise disguised themselves, and went over with an infantry raid early one morning. Their object was to search the enemy front line for cylinders, but none were found. The vicinity of Loos was equally unhealthy, and we were shelled on every occasion there. On June 4th, Cpl. Ireland and Pnr. Iddison were killed, Sgt. Purvis wounded, while Cpl. Morkill and Pnr. Little received bad shell shock. All these casualties were caused by whizz-bangs. Kingsbridge Station, our spot for loading the trucks, was badly damaged, and even Béthune was shelled more frequently than usual.

We prepared to discharge another variety of gas, known as "Green Star", and 1000 cylinders of it were delivered at Minx. This gas, or gas mixture, was composed of Chloropicrin with about 35% Hydrogen Sulphide; both gases were very poisonous, while the former was also a strong lachrymator. A small party was chosen to go back to Helfaut for the purpose of testing "Green Star". It was found to be inflammable, and also was likely to be of great danger from leaks, for it was stored under very high pressure. Lt. Alderson threw a bomb into the gas, which ignited, and he and Sgt. Marsland were gassed for a time. The tests thus showed the gas to be quite unsuitable for our purposes, and a few days later the stock of cylinders we had received was sent away again, to our relief. Capt. Davies' action in insisting upon testing the gas before using it was a very commendable one. Further preparations were carried on at Loos, and soon completed. While awaiting a favourable wind, the Germans made a night raid which was repulsed with heavy loss, though some of the enemy actually got into our front line. Some cylinders were hit, and our trench guard spent an unpleasant time.

Cpl. Harrison and Pnr. Vickery were gassed. Whether any who survived the raid gave information about our gas positions was not known, but there was a further unpleasant experience two nights later when the wind was West. It was once again Sunday night, July 8/9, with the trenches knee-deep in water after heavy rains. Exactly at midnight, while we were awaiting zero hour, a sudden bombardment opened on our positions, following a red rocket signal. Another German raid was expected but did not materialise. Zero hour was 1:00 a.m., and the gas went over well. The Company did very successful work, though Pnrs. Ayres, Boutilier and

Dobsen were gassed. Early August brought more casualties, Pnr. Cawte being killed, Cpls. Coste, Davis, and Wright being wounded. On the night of August 10th, several sections were troubled by enemy gas, fired from shells, while crossing Philscophe plain homewards. It was the new "mustard gas", and very dangerous; eyes were badly affected unless the helmet was put on quickly. This was one of the first occasions on which mustard gas was used along the British Front, and those who endured it were examined and questioned about the affair by a number of M.O.s.

Back on the Hulluch sector again, Cpl. White was instantly killed while unloading trucks at reserve dump. Plans were prepared for attack on August 23rd, but contrary winds held us up until the end of the month. A diary then reads:-

"Night Aug. 31/Sept. 1. Stand-by for trenches 7:10 p.m. wind N.W. later dead calm, then West; via Quarry dump to front line; full moon; Fritz's lines plainly seen; Zero 1:00 a.m., went over splendidly; all quiet till Z + 4½ mins., when green rockets went up; gas reached German line in 58 secs; heavy artillery commenced and Minnies from Benifontaine Wood about Z + 30; frequent whizz-bangs volleys when going out; Mazingarbe heavily shelled. Pnrs. Attwell, Brown, and Parker wounded; several infantry and A.S.C. killed and wounded, and many horses; cylinders discharged 100 R, 420 W, 200 Y. This note indicates that we were using for the first time a mixture of all three gases, red, white and yellow star. The last named was 70% chlorine with 30% Chloropicrin.

We were now being left very much to ourselves,

for it now became the usual arrangement for the infantry to vacate our portion of the front as a safety precaution for themselves. Hence no sooner did we turn up for a strafe, than all other inhabitants of the line withdrew, and disappeared well to the rear. The knowledge that all support had been removed from our obnoxious neighborhood, and that between us and the Germans there was only a long eerie line of black cylinders, was not conducive to cheerful thoughts and an easy mind. We had to ensure that No Man's Land was carefully watched, though on occasion an infantry Lewis Gun team put on a bold face, and moved from one flank to another to indicate to the enemy that our trenches were held in full force. It was like running a little war all on our own. One felt somewhat left in the air, and certainly in the gas, and our barbed wire was never so thick as that of the Germans.

A switch over to another part of the front at Cambrin, some distance North of Vermekles, reminded many of us of 186 Company days. The opposing fronts were almost identical with those existing prior to the Loos battle. British trenches were just East of Cambrin, while the Germans held Auchy-la-Bassee. From Cambrin church vicinity, the cylinders were run on trucks to Munster Tunnel, which was cut out of solid chalk. It was a very fine construction and very safe, with excellent accommodation and a light railway. New emplacements were made in the front line, and we carried-in ourselves midst the usual mud and water. On the night of Sept. 19/20 at 11:00 p.m., a successful discharge was accomplished with 500 cylinders supplying a mixture of three gases. This sector gave us a new experience, for it was occupied by Portuguese troops, who seemed to find their situation very strange.

They were not an aggressive lot and were stiffened by a few attached British infantry. The trenches were remarkably deep, and not much knocked about; it was evidently the desire of these troops to keep them in that condition. Hence they did not show much, if any, activity, and probably we were sent there to waken things up; needless to say, this task we performed very creditably, and the Portuguese only began to smile at us when they found we were on our way out once more.

Immediately afterwards, almost before our puttees were dry, we prepared for sharing in an attack with four other Companies, and it was meant to be a formidable show, on a front from Festubert to Lens. B. & D. Companies fired projectors at Givenchy and near Lens respectively. No. 4 Mortar Company bombarded the Loos to Lens front with phosgene and other bombs. N. Company discharged nearly twelve hundred cylinders at Cambrin, while C. Company released no less than 1250 opposite Hulluch again. The date was October 4th, zero hour 11:30 p.m. There was not much retaliation, though Pnr. Dunn was killed when in support line storing his connecting pipes. We were fortunate, for there were many narrow escapes.

The Orders relating to this attack contain some data which indicates the arrangement of the various Sections in their actual front line positions:--

<u>Section</u>	<u>Front</u>	<u>Officers</u>
13	Boyau 66-67	Lt. Armstrong
12	Boyau 67-68	2Lt. Grantham
15	Boyau 68-69	2Lt. Alderson
11	Boyau 69-71	Lt. Hemens
14	Boyau 71-72A	2Lts. Richards & Fox

Without respite we pushed on with another operation, for as one of our songs reminded us "the winter time is coming, with the hail and rain and snow", and cylinder attacks would soon be virtually impossible. Back at dear old Cambrin 700 "yellow star" were pushed in quickly, and we sat back to await a favourable wind. During this interval, we were interested in the arrival of the first two U.S.A. Officers for training. They were exceedingly keen to help and learn, and when they informed us of what was coming over very soon from "God's own country", we had a feeling that the war might be won within the next five years.

Wind conditions were very variable, and there were two or three "wash-outs". Even on the night of Nov. 6/7, it was exceedingly doubtful; there had been a slight but suitable breeze during the day, but it died away at a critical moment, except for the slightest S.W. drift. Zero was 10:19 p.m. Lt. Alderson was in command, with Lt. Fox assisting. Most of the gas gradually reached the enemy lines, but some eddied back into a portion of our front and caused casualties. Pnr. Bull was killed by it (he was due for leave that night), and eleven men were badly gassed. Enemy retaliation was practically nil for three hours, when our reserve line was heavily shelled. The German Corps H.Q. later admitted considerable gas casualties, and complained that communication had failed between infantry and artillery for some hours, due to the lack of anti-gas discipline. For their bravery and promptness in dealing with our mishap, Lt. Alderson was awarded the M.C., while Sgt. Kightley and Pnrs. Dixon and Towers received the M.M. Subsequent work consisted of the whole company emptying all emplacements, and

removing all our material from trenches and dumps; a general clearing up in fact. Would we ever see this front again? 1918 gave the answer.

On November 20th, a Company "rest" began.

Some jottings of information upon our 1917 campaign might be of interest at this juncture. During brief intervals, there had been pleasant interludes of cricket and football, chiefly inter-section matches, in their due season. At Bethune Theatre we were fortunate to see some excellent shows given by the concert party of the 25th Division. We were actually enlivened for a time at Minx by a good A.S.C. band, the most popular item being "Colonel Bogey". This particular music was all the rage in the summer of 1917; it blared from every gramophone, and was on many occasions our favourite prelude to going up the line at night.

A number of Church Parades had been held, and enjoyed by those who participated. They were mostly compulsory, but a goodly number of men marched willingly to Verquin for the voluntary services. Once the Camp Commandant presided, and by the way, this was a compulsory parade. He gave a stirring address on discipline, assuring us that the Army had had a beneficial influence upon us, bringing about greater attention to cleanliness and decrease in drunkenness. How disreputable we must have been as civilians! During the long period of line work, there had been a number of changes among the commissioned officers and N.C.O.s. Lt. Kent-Jones left us on August 30th for the R.F.C. to subsequently crash his "kite" on the wrong side of the lines and become a prisoner. Lt. Sewill was injured, almost breaking his neck due to crashing into a

deep ditch at Minx. Lt. Hopkins was injured in a motor bike smash early in September and retired hurt until March 1918. There is no detailed information in our records as to how or why these two latter mishaps occurred.

Lt. Richards, wounded in 1916, returned to us at the end of September. Lt. Hemens returned in November from experimental work on gas detection in England. Sgt. Fox was commissioned to H. Company at the beginning of September and returned to C. Company at the end of the month. Sgt. Garside was commissioned to K. Company in October. Lt. Hitchins was posted to us, and took charge of Section 13.

Lt. Alderson, known to all as 'Aldy', and well loved for his escapades, was only known to have run away from danger on one occasion. He was an adept at taking forbidden snapshots in the line, and it was a very risky business. One day, accompanied by Sgt. F. he was touring the Bulluch front to check the trench emplacements, etc. His V.P.H. was with him, and, stationing his sergeant at one end of a long section of trench, he proceeded to take a photo from the other. The front line was completely empty of infantry at this period, and there appeared to be no need for caution. Suddenly there was the sound of someone coming along through the mud. The sergeant had barely time to signal danger to Aldy, before a batch of High Command "red tabs" came round the corner. In a flash Aldy disappeared, and did record time for a considerable distance along the front. It is sad to recall that Aldy was captured when an M.O. in France in the second World War, and died a prisoner of war in Poland.

Orders to move arrived ere long, so that we

were not destined to spend Christmas with our friends in Minx. Some of us may have shed tears on leaving the village and its amenities, though the tear shedding depended upon the interwoven affections which individuals had cultivated during the past eighteen months. There was certainly sadness on the part of our hosts, though they gave us a rousing send-off. But no one among us expressed any regret at leaving the Hulluch and Loos fronts. There was no doubt that our extensive operations there with cloud gas had left their mark upon the enemy, causing heavy casualties, loss of morale, and a permanent dread of that part of the line. On December 16th, we journeyed by motor buses back through Béthune, to the Helfaut area yet again. It was a bitterly cold day, with snow showers, and at night a heavy fall of snow. Our new billets were in the village of Inghem. Again the peaceful contrast from our activities in or near the line was a great boon to us. We revelled in it, and some further days of well-earned relaxation were followed by the Christmas celebrations, some Sections enjoying their festivities in St. Omer.

At this season our thoughts usually dwelt upon the more humorous side of our past activities, and many amusing incidents were recalled round the billet fires. Alas, even as those fires blazed and flickered and finally died out, so have many of those memorable stories died too. But some are still remembered, cherished in the minds of those who partook of their experiences at the time. When recalled, they produce a quiet smile, and memories run on to other incidents of those past days. Sgt. Bleby remembers a true incident of the days of mining activities at the front, and it is worthy of note that this sergeant was

promoted from pioneer to lance-corporal, and later actually jumped the revered rank of corporal to become sergeant. There was obviously no limit to the ingenuity of Skipper Davies and our orderly room staff. The then Lance-Cpl. Bleby was in charge of a trench guard at the North end of the Loos salient, where mining activity was brisk. A new infantry battalion had taken over our part of the line that day, and late at night an agitated infantryman came along with a message that his C.O. desired to see our Lance-Cpl. i/c at his dugout immediately. The C.O. was really scared, and stated that his men could not settle down or sleep because of an alarming 'tapping' sound. What did it all mean? He expected an R.E. to know. Bleby informed him that he was not a mining engineer, far from it; but mining and counter mining and "blowing-up" had been going on in that area for some time, and that nothing could be done about it. The C.O. seemed greatly shocked, but was somewhat pacified when the Special R.E. told him that as long as his men could hear the tapping there was nothing to worry about. It was when there was no tapping that something might happen!

One morning a party of C. Company were carrying-in emplacement boxes, and as the procession passed along the trench, an infantryman asked his pal: "What the hell are these b-- things they're bringing up?" Quickly came the reply. "Cages for the b-- R.E.s." On another occasion, a party of us were being led by an officer towards the front line on a rather dark night. As we reached reserve line a rather irritable sentry enquired belligerently "Oo goes there?" The officer, who had a pronounced lisp, replied reassuringly "All wight sentwy, R.(W)E!" As the party moved forward the sentry muttered "R.We!

R. We! Are we bloody hell!" Our guides had incidents galore, amusing anxious and tragic. Cpl. Dalton was one of a batch of guides leading parties one night from a reserve line dump to the front along certain 'Boyaux'. He found himself left until the last, when Lt. Armstrong instructed him thus:-

"Corporal Dalton, you will take this party up to bays X, Y, Z, south of Boyau 55". The honest corporal replied "I don't know that part of the line at all, sir" and got the reply "Well, do the best you can". After the party started moving, an uneasy infantry officer enquired whether the corporal really knew where he was going, and a lying corporal assured him emphatically that he did. The lying corporal then proceeded to blunder along the top, watching the Verey lights, and gazing hopelessly at the maze of stars. At last the front line was reached, and it was at exactly the right place in it too. The doubting officer congratulated him, "This is the first time I have ever had a guide who knew where he was going"

For another guide incident, we must turn to the Australians, for this happening was very typical of their attitude towards discipline, as we knew. One summer evening, Cpl. F. was waiting near Vermelles church to guide an Australian carrying party to the front line, and one of our temporary officers was in charge of the whole arrangement. The carrying party, numbering nearly two hundred men, arrived on the scene, and lay around waiting for the cylinders to come along. After waiting for some time, our officer began to walk down the road, saying to his corporal in rather a loud voice, "Let me know when the waggon arrive, corporal, I'm going down to the canteen". Whereupon one of the Aussies, hearing this, cried

out "Did you hear that lads? He's going down to the canteen; let's all go to the canteen!" Immediately the men rose in a body, and the whole two hundred of them trooped down the road behind the officer; swarming into the large hut, they remained there until in due time the corporal came along to let his officer know the waggons had arrived. Only then did the Aussies come out again.

Two other incidents throw some light on our days at Minx. Another Company was attached to us for some particular strafe. Some of them, including one officer, were billeted in one of the houses on the Noeux-les-Mines road. When Cpl. "Taffy" Roberts was orderly corporal it was his duty to warn men of the attached Company that they were to parade immediately to go up the line. Roberts visited all the rooms in turn, and at last came to a room with one occupant. "Get up, man. Parade in quarter of an hour's time in the yard!" "Very good, Corporal!" "I'm telling you man, get up at once!" "Very good, corporal!" "It's no use your saying "very good, corporal" and lying there. Get up at once, or I'll kick your b-- a--!" At the Christmas section dinner, Roberts was awarded the M.C. for "telling off" an officer.

Finally, Cpl. Handy was the witness of an untoward happening at our Minx baths. There was a small room in the pit-head buildings where we had permission to use the miners' hot baths; hot and cold water pipes ran round the walls. Handy was taking a bath there at the same time as Pnr. Potts, and the latter, having reached the stage of removing his shirt, innocently sat on the hot water pipe to balance himself. Now the water was scalding hot, with the result that Potts (was

severely burned on his rear. The astounding sequel of this was that he went to Blighty because of his injury, and that at a time when no leave was being granted at all!

We had poets in our ranks. What a pity that most of their efforts were wasted, for their poetry, composed in billet or front line trench in the midst of the stirring experiences of war, must have contained much that was worth preserving, and would have vividly conveyed to posterity our reactions to those great events in which we played a not unimportant part. Pnr. Winn composed a parody (with apologies to Robert Browning).

STRAFING BY NIGHT

The sandbags and the sickening stench
And the yellow half-moon, large and low;
And the glaring Verrey Lights that keep
The drowsy R.E.s from their sleep.
I leave the mine shaft with fevered brow,
And slip about in the slushy trench.

Then a bay of "rats" with yellow band;
An S.B.R. on my knee appears;
A jerk with a spanner and three full turns
The Corp'ral's approbation earns:
And my voice less loud through its qualms
and fears
Than the hissing gas in No Man's Land.

Cpl. W. E. Wright must have written much poetry from 186 Company days onwards, and he was spontaneous with his parodies. Here is one, relating to the enemy "minenwerfers". Everyone will remember that German trench mortars were "Finnies"



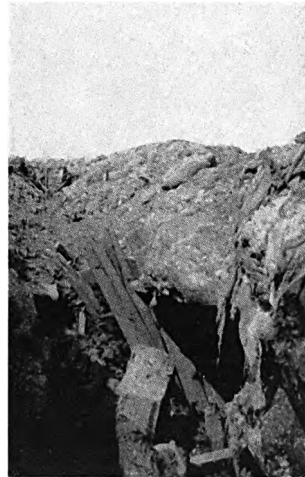
A "REHEARSAL" AT
HELFAUT, 1916.



EFFECT OF AN ENEMY
BOMBARDMENT ON OUR POSITIONS,
HULLUCH FRONT.



A CYLINDER EMPLACEMENT
WELL SANDBAGGED BEFORE
A "STRAFE."



THE SAME EMPLACEMENT
ON THE MORNING AFTER.



EXAMINING CYLINDERS
IN FRONT LINE, HULLUCH, 1917.



RELAXING IN
BILLETS AT MINX
1917.



GERMAN 'MINNIE'
EFFECT ON FRONT
LINE, HULLUCH, 1917.



LT. C. R. ALDERSON,
HAY ALLEY, 1917.

or "Pineapples"; ours were named "toffee apples"
or "flying pigs" according to their shape.

TO MINNIE

Minnie seemed a pretty name, many years ago,
Minnie was a pretty girl, that I used to know.
But "tempores mutantur", and now it doth befall
That Minnie is a name that I no longer like at all.

See them sailing through the air, like a big
oil-drum;
Hear the crash when they explode, hear the pieces
hum;
See the spot that one has hit, trench has vanished
quite.
See one burst up in the air, not a pleasant sight.

Minnie, Minnie Barnett, was a jolly little lass;
When years ago I knew her; faith how soon the
seasons pass!
But Minnie, Minenwerfer, is a nasty noisy gun,
If I never hear another, I shall write and thank
the Hun.

SOME HOPES

by

R. F. Dalton, 1917

Just as we left it yesterday
Before the sudden order came,
Remained our murky billet room.
But now, no sunlight lent its rays.
Thick dust
O'er snowed the cards of our unfinished
game.

The thoughts of us, the three that
 had returned,
 Were centred on the fourth who lay
 So still upon the plain. A gust
 Of wind came shivering through the
 shattered panes,
 And, by the guttering candle's flame,
 We saw the cards that made his hand.

Then, as Jack fumbled at his pipe,
 While 'dummy' went to fetch our mail,
 I saw our dead friend's partner stand
 Scanning the upturned card heaps. Pale,
 And, doubtless, thinking of our comrade
 lost
 And of his high abilities,
 He ran' his eye o'er the unplayed hand.

His murmur reached me through the gloom
 -- "Great possibilities ----- great
 possibilities!"

CHAPTER FIVE

1918 THE ROAD TO VICTORY

It had been a white Christmas, and when the New Year dawned the countryside was still under snow. At the beginning of another year, there was certainly no optimism with regard to an early finish to the war. The end seemed further off, especially now that the Russian Revolution had enabled Germany to make a separate peace in the East, with the result that more German armies were being transferred to the Western Front. We realised we were in for a rough time. However, "sufficient unto the day" and we liked Inghem. It was a picturesque little village lying between Helfaut and Therouanne, and just off the main road. There was a quaint old church at the corner, with an open space in front, where held our Company parades. The quiet village street had small but picturesque farms on either side, and the numerous barns served as good billets. The street led only to fields and open countryside where we carried out various operations. The peacefulness of our surroundings was much appreciated. At first, however, the attitude of the inhabitants was cold and rather unfriendly, an unusual experience for us. Portuguese troops had occupied the place before us, and the local people had become susceptible to propaganda.

Before long, friendships were established, and we were very happy among the inhabitants. It was later disclosed that they had believed the rumour that the English intended to keep the Pas de Calais after the war, as payment for fighting for the French. In his memoirs, Lloyd George stated that this was a common belief throughout that part of France, and was often a nuisance to billeting officers.

On January 3rd, the whole Company underwent a gas respirator test on Helfaut Common by standing in a gas cloud for some time. Unfortunately, this caused an unexpected tragedy. Our fine collie dog, Mark, which had been the Company favourite for many months, and in the special care of Section 14, ran into the cloud after the men, and was badly gassed. He died the following day.

A very important change-over was made in arms, our revolvers being replaced with rifles. No longer could we be mistaken by misguided infantry for gentlemen! Armed with rifle and bayonet, we could now be impregnated with some infantry training, to which end some of our officers took special courses in hate! Those among us who had played about with rifles in the early days of the war, now had the opportunity of showing the others how to "slope" and "present". The rifles, of course, created a much smarter effect on parade, but, if our main job was still to be handling cylinders and projectors, such a weapon as a rifle would be a confounded nuisance, and apt to poke either our own or someone else's eye out. Then again, in a time of emergency we might be transformed into infantry, and there were disadvantages in that. Lt. Hemens departed

to the 10th Corps Lewis-Gun School near Bailleul with a small party for training. For future operations, we were going to receive some protection by a gun of our very own, when the infantry left us to our own resources.

Our time was chiefly shared between cylinder work and training with projectors. With reference to the former, it was understood that preparations were proceeding for a gigantic surprise gas attack, to catch the Germans on that part of the front where they were presumed to be massing for a big Spring offensive. Various experiments were made in ways of mass arrangement of cylinders, staggering them in clusters of three, etc. One idea was that they would be rushed up to the line a very short time before enemy attacks were due, and we would gallantly discharge them in the open. A further idea was to lay cylinders in shallow trenches at a slight angle, and camouflage them with hessian, etc. until required for use. Lectures and demonstrations were given on the art of camouflage, and Lt. Armstrong ably performed the duties of camouflage officer, assisted by Sgt. Bleby as the company camouflage sergeant. But the proposed attack never took place. It may have been found impracticable or the German offensive may have begun some weeks earlier than was expected. Certainly vast numbers of cylinders were sent down to the Somme area but never used, and many were over-run by the enemy.

Projectors were rapidly becoming an important weapon of the Special Brigade, and we began some useful training on Bilques Common. We found this work very interesting, and soon adapted ourselves to the new type of attack.

The projector was a device invented by Major Livens of 186 Company fame, and became known as the "Livens Projector". It was actually a very simple type of gun, devised for the purpose of delivering gas at full strength upon any desired spot in the enemy lines, such as machine gun posts, strong points, etc. The guns were steel tubes 8" diameter, enclosed at one end, and either 2'-9" or 4' in length. They were put into position by first preparing a shallow trench on surface ground. A heavy cylindrical steel baseplate was placed in this trench, and the base of the gun rested on it, so fixed that the gun was inclined at an angle of 45° , and pointing in the required direction. The baseplate took the firing recoil, thus preventing the gun disappearing into the earth. The trench was of such a depth that the guns were buried up to their nozzles, and either 20 or 25 guns were placed together in the same trench to constitute a battery. Into each gun, a propellant charge was lowered, this being a cylindrical box containing a calculated amount of gunpowder according to the distance the bomb was to be fired. It was provided with an electric fuse and a couple of wire leads. All the leads for a battery were then connected up in series to form a complete circuit. The type of bomb or drum used was cylindrical in shape. It was fitted with a detonator and time fuse; later types carried a percussion fuse. The bursting charge did not completely shatter the bomb, but split it open fully to allow the gas to escape. To fire such a battery, a hand exploder was introduced into the electrical circuit, and when the handle of this was smartly pressed down, the current produced fired the fuses, and the bombs went hurtling over on to the desired target. Actually a number of

batteries were dug in close proximity so that a concentration of several hundred guns could be fired simultaneously. This type of operation meant that all the digging in, loading, etc., had to be done out "on top", and since the battery positions were planned to be very near the front line, usually between the support and reserve trenches, they were very susceptible to enemy action, by rifle and machine gun fire. Also, owing to the heavy casualties which projector attacks caused among the enemy, the German High Command issued very strict orders regarding anti-gas devices and discipline, and the artillery were ordered to concentrate on any suspected projector positions. We became very much aware of this later. Very careful camouflaging was essential, for a German plane might spot the gun positions which would then be destroyed by shellfire. Altogether, although there were certain advantages with regard to our own safety, it was an unhealthy occupation, and usually there was no desire to linger on the job. A four-foot gun weighed 120 lbs., the base-plate another 40 lbs, and a full drum 65 lbs.; the drum contained 30 lbs. of gas. All carrying in and out was to be done by ourselves, so there was plenty of horsework ahead; probably it was best to hang on to a base-plate, for it was certainly safer than a drum, and when necessary, could be employed as a very useful head cover. Much wider wind limits were permissible with projectors than with cylinders, and the gas reached its object more quickly, hence giving less warning. A few seconds after the explosion and the gas was where we wanted it to be; no wonder the German infantry suffered from "nerves", and of course the gas concentration produced was so great that gas masks were useless in the immediate vicinity of the target.

For variation, we indulged in company drill, route marches, night operations. We marched through neighbouring villages occupied by other Companies of our Brigade. It was good to spot some of our former pals, and exchange a cheery greeting. At other times, we met with our Portuguese allies, and the greetings exchanged were not so hearty. But the happy days at Inghem passed too quickly, and it was not intended that we should remain there for the duration.

Among many of the special treats which higher authority provided for our delectation as a proof that they loved us and only thought of our welfare, there was one always held in reserve to be launched upon us when we least expected it. That was the arrival of sudden orders to move. Of course, such orders might be cancelled within a few hours, but that was part of the game; and just when our best-informed cook had told us that we were definitely "staying put" and confirmed it by erecting a new cook-house structure, we were obeying orders to pack up once more. So it was at Inghem, and when orders had been received and duly cancelled two or three times, we found ourselves at 5:00 a.m. on March 11th parading for the last time on the little village square. As we all know, dogs love soldiers, and will follow them anywhere, and on this occasion not only the dogs of Inghem but those for miles around gathered by the church to share in the farewells. All the village was out at this early hour, and gave us a grand send-off; the dogs followed us all the way as we marched down into Wizernes, and were with difficulty prevented from entraining with us. Our train conveyed us via Etaples to the small village of Bouquemaison, a short distance from Doullens. Beyond the village was a small hamlet named Canteleux, and a large farm there

not only accommodated the whole Company, but the orderly room and the officers' mess as well. The weather was very mild and dry, and conditions were exceedingly pleasant for us. Our job was to clear a large dump of cylinders from the vicinity. We liked being at Cantèleux, for it was surrounded by lovely countryside. But this was the fateful month of March 1918, and everyone knew that a great German offensive would come sooner or later. None of us realised its imminence, though rumours were widespread. Official news did not give us much information, but the quietude and inaction came to a sudden end with a terrific bombardment of the whole Somme front by the enemy throughout the night of March 20/21. Weather conditions were ideal for offensive operations, and a dense mist on the following morning seriously hindered British observations. Heavy gunfire continued all the next day; rumours reached us that the enemy had made serious advances, and the British Fifth Army was in retreat. Capt. Nye went up to the line beyond Bapaume, and learned disquieting news. Lt. Grantham went up on a motor bike the following day, and had great difficulty in getting back as he became mixed up in the confusion and congestion of the retreating forces. We were all very restless at this ominous turn of events, and stood by ready to move at a moment's notice.

On Palm Sunday, March 24th, we moved in lorries to Pernes, so that while King George V was motoring Southwards to the threatened part of the Somme battlefield, C Special Company, by providence or our Skipper's intervention, was travelling North. On April 3rd, our move continued, and took us to our old area, where we rested for one night at the village of Verquin.

But dear old Minx was only just down the hill, and tempted us. The next day, we were back once more in our old billets, becoming familiar again with the old haunts.

Five U.S.A. officers and 56 other ranks arrived for training. Without any delay, preparations for a cylinder attack were commenced in our old positions at Loos; Kingsbridge Station at Philosophe, Posen Alley and the other well-known trenches saw us again; we needed no guides to show us our way round. "Rats" were installed in the front line, during which work we realised once more how bad trench conditions could be. During the winter, our infantry had been withdrawn to certain strong points, and trenches soon became neglected. Hence, we had to find our way into dilapidated trenches, and improve them as much as possible, not forgetting to warn the sentries that we were somewhere out in front. Conditions were probably just as bad in the enemy lines, and it was common belief that no Germans were there. It was jokingly repeated that one German went along their lines after dark, fired a fixed rifle, then gave a few rounds from an M.G. in another spot, followed this with a Verey light; after this he went back home for the night. But enemy artillery was certainly very active, and there was heavy shelling of our lines and communications every day and night. Gas shells and H.F. caused us some casualties. Mules were a nuisance; on our first night in Loos, they stampeded because of shellfire, and gave us much extra work in wearily pushing the trucks home ourselves.

On April 8th, a second German offensive commenced North of La Bassée Canal, driving back the Portuguese troops holding the line, and necessitating a withdrawal of British forces on

their flanks. The enemy made considerable advanced and in a few days had almost reached Béthune. British positions astride the canal were rapidly strengthened, and prevented the Germans crossing to the South. If the German thrust had succeeded, the communications of our forces from La Bassée to Arras would have been seriously threatened. Very harassing shellfire now came to us from the North, and journeys to the line became more hazardous. It was particularly worrying at night to see the German Verey lights rising apparently some miles in our rear. A big shell dump near Minx railway crossing attracted enemy attention, so that we did not feel happy even when "at home". On April 18th, very bitter enemy attacks were made on Givenchy, which was held by the 55th Division (West Lancashire), and was the key to the canal positions. This Division fought most heroically, and at the end of the attacks still completely held its ground. This prevented any further withdrawals, and put a serious check to the German offensive. During this period, many of our trenches and emplacements were destroyed, enemy shells burying or bursting cylinders and causing casualties. On May 9th, Pnr. Povey died of wounds and several men were badly gassed, while we were standing-to in the line awaiting a favourable wind; but on May 12th, wind conditions changed in our favour, and the cloud attack took place successfully at 10:30 p.m. A few men suffered from the effects of gas, but most were slight cases. The following morning many dead Germans were observed behind their lines, ambulances were openly visible, and fires burning in the area all day and night. Forty dead bodies were counted outside the enemy's wire, and more dead were seen being loaded on to trucks on a field tramway.

Dear old Béthune was now being heavily shelled, no doubt because it was an important centre of troop communications in that area. Most of the civilians left, but many were killed or injured. On May 17th, we witnessed from our billets the sad sight of the cathedral actually collapsing under shellfire; a huge column of smoke and dust rose up, and the town was enveloped in it for several hours. Fire raged for several days. The famous ancient belfry in the Grande Place was destroyed, and its well-known clock went with it; but one C Company officer, initials F.A.R.H., rooting in the debris, picked up a marvellous souvenir, one hand of this clock. Roads, villages, dumps, etc., around us were severely strafed, both with gas and H.E. Late on Whitsunday night, May 19th, a shell fragment came through the wall of the Officers' Mess, smashed an iron stove, and finished up in the piano, at which Lt. Hopkins was finishing his preludes. Promptly the following morning the Mess was moved to a safer position.

During this month, we lost the companionship of Cpl. Dalton, one of the October 1915 reinforcements. At Minx he was in charge at night of the Lewis gun, which involved extra duties. A victim of trench fever, he left us with great reluctance.

Our Lewis gun team had done its best to achieve notoriety, for it fired on various occasions at German planes, and in one instance claimed a victim when the enemy crashed. No one questions the probability that our team had done the job, but, unfortunately, a number of other teams in the vicinity made the same claim. However, honour was satisfied by duly putting a notch on the barrel of our gun. The L. G. position was a

neatly constructed and well sandbagged 'gun-pit' on the Noeux-les-Mines road.

We now prepared for our first projector attack, from positions near Hay Alley. This first digging in was a nasty experience. About fifty men were busy on top, preparing trenches and putting in projectors, and the night at first was very quiet. Then enemy artillery opened directly upon us with great accuracy; how they knew we were there, whether they heard unusual sounds, or whether it was just one of their chance strafes, we had not time to argue about. We were out working in the middle of four belts of wire, and it wasn't easy to find the exits. Two or three men dived simultaneously into the same shellhole, only to find the ground burning hot; the hole had evidently just been made. In spite of heat and fumes, they remained there, since someone made the comforting remark that a shell never dropped twice in the same place! Little work was done that night, for the barrage continued spasmodically for hours, and it was just a matter of camouflaging as dawn was breaking. However, preparations were completed to time, and at 1:30 a.m. on the night of June 7/8 about 300 drums were fired. During the actual night of firing, conditions were quiet, and the attack passed off without incident.

On June 11th, the Company left Minx, where constant harassing fire now gave us little rest when out of the line, and moved further back to the Bois des Dames; a wood at Hesdigneul near La Buissiere, which was the First Army H.Q. The peaceful conditions and beautiful surroundings were highly appreciated by all ranks. Our shelters were primitive at first, being waterproof

sheets tied to the trees. Some tents were provided later and further protection was afforded by excavating about two feet below ground level. The German planes had acquired a habit of dropping small bombs which made shallow holes three or four feet across, and cut the heads off the daisies. Although we were disturbed at times by night bombers, the only casualty here was one of the watercart mules. Several people were killed, however, in a nearby field hospital. We now had to make longer journeys to reach the line, but there was little objection to this.

A second projector shoot took place from positions adjacent to our first, at 11:30 p.m., on the night of June 18/19, under excellent conditions, the wind being S.S.W. at 4 m.p.h. The line was quiet, and we encountered little retaliation. About this time, our beloved O.C. Capt. Davies, was recalled to England, and we were very sorry to lose him. Throughout the whole of his long command of C Company, he had been most considerate to all ranks, had taken a personal interest in every man, and did everything possible to assist our safety and comfort; a fond father of a happy family! Capt. Nye took over the command and attained the rank of Major early in August. He too, knew us all well, and exercised considerable skill in dealing with the idiosyncrasies of "other ranks". His humour often rose to the surface when he was castigating some luckless person for disobeying orders, and the criminal usually went off with the feeling that his sin was forgiven. Lt. Armstrong once more distinguished himself by being arrested as a spy. He was "away from home" for a short period, and was observed to be flourishing a company pass-book, containing enough passes to

take him anywhere. He deserved arresting!

Now that we were living in the region of H. Q., company, orders were issued to the effect that extra smartness and cleanliness were essential, whenever we went out of billets. Some of us visited La Buissière at times, but the majority preferred to remain under the shade of the trees, and relax.

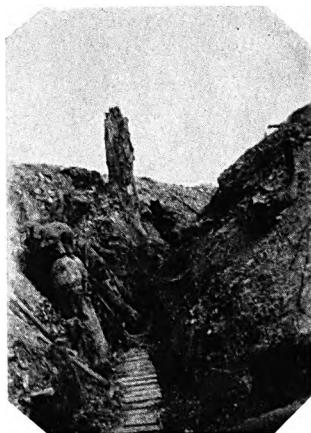
We were now about to experience a variation in our work with cylinders. A new form of attack had been recently devised, in which the object was to discharge simultaneously a very large number of cylinders, so as to produce a far greater concentration of gas cloud than was possible with trench attack; under favourable conditions, this would penetrate with serious effects to a much greater distance behind the enemy lines. Light railway trucks were to be loaded with cylinders at a railhead some distance from the front, and a train load would then be taken up at night to a convenient point when wind conditions were favourable, and be speedily discharged. Such a scheme was known as a "Beam attack", and all members of C Company present with us at that time will readily recall something of the procedure by which the attack was carried out as far as we were concerned. The depot we used was at Barlin, where no less than a total of 1260 cylinders containing phosgene were stacked systematically into a train of 60 special trucks. The cylinders were fixed firmly in an upright position, and the outlet of each was fitted with a specially prepared spigot, containing a detonator. These detonators could be exploded electrically. All those in one truck were connected up in series, and the trucks connected in parallel to form a complete circuit which

could be employed for firing the whole train when desired. When loading was complete, the cylinder valves and electrical circuits were tested frequently. The whole train was carefully camouflaged, and a strict guard kept on it. Fortunately, no enemy shells or bombs disturbed the serenity of our "special" train during the preparations or throughout the waiting time.

The actual Beam attack was to be carried out in co-operation with three other Companies employing trains on a front between Oppy and Hulluch. The Hulluch section was, of course, our very own as usual, and on the night of July 12/13 a patrol tractor took up the train from Kingsbridge Station, preceded by a pilot engine, under the command of Capt. Nye. The line was patrolled by a maintenance gang of R.E.s who ensured rail safety, and were ready to deal with any breakdowns or delays. The night was quiet, and the sounds produced by the heavy, steadily-moving train as it proceeded out into the void caused some anxiety. Lt. Grantham was O/C train on its outward journey, and one "other ranks" was given the honour of both riding up and down as a guard on each truck. Lt. Fox was to accompany the train home again! The rest of the Company went up to the rendezvous close to Hay dump, near reserve line, and checked over the trucks allotted to them as soon as the train was in its final position roughly parallel to our front. Silence was now essential, for we were certainly in the danger zone, and any untoward noise might bring down shellfire upon our bunch of more than a thousand cylinders, all standing up on top, and literally asking for it. The waiting seemed interminable, but the wind slowly changed to ideal conditions, 4 m.p.h., S.W. Zero was 1:40 a.m., and at that instant Lt. Grantham had



CYLINDERS ROUGHLY
INSTALLED IN FRONT LINE,
LOOS SECTOR, 1918.



CYLINDERS IN FRONT
LINE, HULLUCH SECTOR,
1918.



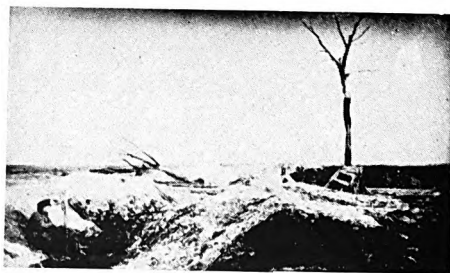
VIEW OF NO MAN'S LAND,
FROM BOYAU 64, 1918.



PROJECTORS IN POSITION NEAR
VENDIN ALLEY, 1917.



POSEN ALLEY, NEAR SUPPORT
LINE, 1918.



HUGO LANE COMMUNICATION
TRENCH, 1918.



TRUCK OF CYLINDERS PREPARED
FOR 'BEAM' ATTACK, JULY, 1918.



BRITISH CEMETERY, PHILOSOPHE,
1919.

the unique and memorable experience of blowing the whole train up. All infantry had been withdrawn well away from the wide danger area at a fixed hour, and there was an interesting order to the effect that "Cpl Laycock will take up the Lewis gun and fire in a Northerly direction from a position 100 yds. to windward of the train so as to mask the noise of the discharge without interfering in any way with the operating personnel." The corporal's gun was evidently to be pointed away from us, to our satisfaction. Everyone of course stood well back awaiting the critical moment. Immediately there was a terrific hissing noise as the huge release of gas commenced. The thick grey cloud was a magnificent and awe-inspiring sight as it rolled steadily forward widening as it went. We could see it pouring over our own front trenches, and then away across No Man's Land. It was certainly the greatest gas cloud we had witnessed. For some time, there was no retaliation, and while we waited for the gas to clear from the vicinity of the train, we discussed the simplicity of the affair, and congratulated ourselves that all had passed off well. We began preparing the train for departure, and awaited orders to move. Suddenly a heavy shell came over and landed near our positions, probably by chance. It was a dud, otherwise, Sgt. Belby and a number of others might have lost all further interest in the proceedings. A second shell came and exploded. The engine driver, not a Special Brigade R.E., suddenly panicked at the unaccustomed proximity of such an explosion, and started up his train. The next moment, he was moving off without warning, and away the train flew homewards at breakneck speed, with men hanging on in all positions for dear life, while trying to avoid the trail of gas which the trucks were still

producing. How the train and its personnel reached Philosophe in safety, no one ever knew; apparently the "gangers" on the line escaped being run over by a miracle. Many of us "missed our connection", and when the shelling was over had to walk home. Thinking things over afterwards in the peace of our billets, it was generally agreed that this new "beam" attack was a comparatively cushy one. As a matter of fact, we had been exceedingly fortunate, for some of the other companies experienced a much more difficult time. Later evidence indicated that enemy losses were very severe, and the cloud penetrated several miles behind the front, reaching Dourges (12 Km); German regiments even on the flank of the cloud admitted considerable casualties. However, we never had the pleasure of partaking in that type of attack again. A diary of two days later states:- "Beaucoup new Cpls. and L-Cpls. on parade this morning!" Evidently the Q. M. S. had been busy ordering more strips as a reward for some good work.

While awaiting the "beam" attack, preparations for further projector attacks had been progressing in our customary area. The effect on the enemy in casualties and loss of morale was becoming so serious, that everything possible was done to prevent such attacks materialising. Thus the repeated firing of projectors from the same sector resulted in greater hazards for us, since constant harassing fire was employed wherever our positions were suspected. Pnr. Chapple, a staunch Cornishman, was killed instantly by M.G. fire one night; he had finished his own task, but instead of returning to the comparative safety of a trench, was assisting others to finish theirs. Another night, Pnr. Stafford was hit, and died next day.

On the night of July 18/19, we gave a double affair at 10:45 p.m. zero; Lt. Armstrong at Chapel Alley with 260 guns; Lt. Fox at Hay Alley with 280 guns. Half an hour later came heavy retaliation; it was good to find a convenient tunnel where we could relax while enemy artillery did their best to dig up our guns for us. While clearing the positions a night or two later, under harassing whizzbang strafes, Sgt. Whitlaw was badly hit, and died on the way to hospital. Shortly afterwards, Sgt. Bleby left us for England, to take a commission. There was now a somewhat ominous interlude, to curb any enthusiasm we might be feeling. It was feared that a big German attack was imminent across La Bassée Canal, and we were allotted the task of infantry. Our job was to hold the village of Verquigneul, acting as a rearguard for our retiring troops. Evidently we were to be sacrificed for the common good; for a General came to take a final look at us. We manned suitable positions, and our gaze was constantly Eastwards. But fortunately the threat passed, no Germans came along, and we lived "to gas again".

The actual occasion of a projector attack was not in itself bad, provided the enemy was behaving quietly. Fewer men were needed than when digging-in, and exposure to enemy fire was not so prolonged. We wanted darkness, but not that of an inky nature which could make movement difficult. Strict silence was observed, for no doubt "Les oreilles ennemis vous écoutent", and the wind would be in their direction. Those men detailed for various jobs climbed out of the neighbouring trench, and went quickly across to the battery positions. Camouflage was removed, caps taken from the gun muzzles, then the charge box was lowered into position, followed by the full

gas drum from which the safety pin was then removed. The leads were connected, and each battery tested, to ensure complete circuits; finally the whole series of batteries was linked up, ready for simultaneous firing at the appropriate moment. Wind readings were being taken, and final reports signifying "all ready" were sent back in code to our H.Q. At zero hour some distinguished person "pooped" the exploder, there was a flash accompanied by a terrific explosion, and the gas drums were hurtling over to the enemy positions, on which they were bursting within a few seconds. The explosion of the drums and the consequent gas cloud around the target provided a fearsome spectacle, which was always enhanced when oil drums were fired. Immediately the discharge was over, men rushed out to find if all batteries had "fired", for sometimes in spite of all precautions a faulty connection might occur and cause a failure in some battery or other; as soon as things were cool enough, the camouflage was replaced, and a guard left until daylight to see that all was safe and well hidden on the position. More shoots followed rapidly. On Aug. 4th, 700 guns were fired at 11:30 p.m. zero. On this occasion somebody must have told the Germans for they barraged our positions nastily half an hour before zero. Neither guns nor drums were destroyed; it was remarkable how safe a gas drum actually was while inside the gun, and connections were made on time. We suffered one or two casualties. Other "shoots" took place during the same month.

Early in September two new and interesting personalities joined us; Capt. Strange from Z Company, and Lt. 'John' Cotton from the 6th London Regiment T.F. Lt. Alderson said goodbye, and went off in his usual exuberant spirit to

take a commission in the R.F.C. Dvr. Huntley was transferred; he was long remembered by all as a highly competent and fearless driver of the Company box car, and always ready with his Cockney humour. His delight in speeding on some occasions made one's hair stand on end to a greater extent than a dirty night up the line.

Rumours came along that the German lines had been evacuated opposite our Loos-Hulluch sector, as no infantry fire could be drawn. But there was considerable mustard-gas shelling between Philosophe and the line, causing us casualties. Further projector attacks were carried out, the "finale" on our home ground being in the charge of Lts. Armstrong and Grantham, on Sept. 23rd. This was a unique daylight show, zero being 3:30 p.m.; it will be realised that no time was lost in camouflaging again under enemy observation. On Sept. 22nd, the Company had left the Hesdigneul billets, and moved over to the village of Ruitz.

Offensive operations for the month finished with two attacks on the night of Sept. 29/30, near Vieille Chapelle, at a considerable distance North from our home base. We prepared for these in entirely new surroundings, and the nights were intensely dark. Lt. Grantham had a bad accident on his mo'bike, and went to hospital, Oct. 1st. To his great chagrin, he was not able to return to his beloved Company again, and thus unfortunately missed those joyous experiences which were soon to come. Lt. Cotton was in command of Sections 11 and 13 firing gas drums, and Lt. Fox with Sections 12, 14, and 15, firing smoke and oil. Both discharges were in support of infantry raids, zero hours being 9:00 p.m. and 7:30 a.m. respectively. The raids were very successful, and a number of prisoners taken. Cpl. Mapp was severely wounded

and died a few days later. October arrived, with the news that Bulgaria had surrendered, and more sensational news still of a German retirement all along our Northern front. Wingles Tower, near Hulluch, from which enemy observers had spied for so long to our discomfort, had been blown up, and British infantry had actually advanced some miles, facing little opposition. Such news, of course, was unbelievable; the trench system between our lines and Hulluch was surely there for ever! But on Oct. 3rd, the Company found the news to be true, for most of them witnessed new and strange sights for themselves.

The beginning of the end, so long looked for, had come. For on proceeding to the line to remove some projector batteries which would be of no further use in that position, we found the Philosophe plain and all roads leading to the front line alive with troops moving without interference "on top". It was staggering to find that we could walk over to our positions in the open, and proceed to dig the guns out, as in our days of training; a short distance away, Labour Companies were repairing the shell-pitted Hulluch road, and actually continuing it across the former No Man's Land into the village itself. Vehicles of all kinds were passing up the road, and proceeding Eastwards. No wonder that for once we became noisy and hilarious, and gazed around in amazement; how different our maze of trenches now appeared to be. Some of us, while taking a spell of rest, went across the former lines, and reached within a few hundred yards of Wingles. No one quite knew where the enemy front was, and the infantry were feeling their way forward cautiously, suffering an occasional casualty. Enemy artillery was firing at random, and there was great danger among the German dugouts, where

many booby traps had been left. In No Man's Land, we found the remains of men, both British and German, long since dead, rotted equipment, shattered rifles. A strange find was the remains of a Uhlan cavalry helmet, which must have been lost there in the earliest days of the war; what story lay behind it and its owner? Relics of our projector attacks were also seen, many burst gas drums being scattered about. Away in the distance, big fires were burning as the enemy destroyed much material which he could not move.

This particular part of the British front was unique, for while the tide of battle had swept to and fro during the past four years and German or British advances had caused various changes in their respective front positions, here from Hulluch to Givenchy the opposing lines had remained static. This was probably the only portion of line from the sea to the Somme which had remained thus since the Loos battle of 1915.

So we came to what was our greatest day since the Special Brigade was formed. For on Oct. 22nd, C Special Company moved forwards into new territory.

Leaving Ruitz in a convoy of lorries, with every man still clinging to the souvenirs he had hoarded, we journey for the last time through Philosophie. Away to the right, near the shattered mine and railway station, long rows of white wooden crosses mark the graves of those who died here. This British cemetery had grown ominously day by day, throughout all our long sojourn in this area, and some of our comrades lie buried there. Proceeding to Vermelles, the well-known artillery positions are seen to be abandoned. We pass the church ruins (of which the memories are still so vivid); the shattered steps near which we assembled at dusk waiting for carrying-parties or for the order to

move up, and where in the early dawn we had rested on our way home after many a heavy night's fatigue. It had been the painful road for the wounded, and the final road for the dead. Emerging from the village ruins we can now see the lines of trenches extending for miles on either side; a notice board warns us "All ranks must enter the trench here". Soon we are crossing the actual trenches in which we had toiled so long; every track is paved with memories, and every trench has something to tell, for it was here that so many of our pals had died. Crossing No Man's Land, we look down upon that terrible area which for years has been the place of greatest danger and death; untold suffering and unknown sacrifice are buried there for ever. A few moments later, we are crossing old German lines and entering re-conquered ground; trenches, shattered trees, ruined villages. Gradually the scene changes, shell-holes become less frequent, some trees flourish untouched, and houses are in better condition. We cross improvised bridges, for the former ones lie a mass of twisted ironwork submerged in the water below. All telegraph poles without exception have been sawn down, and their tangle of wires litters the roadside. We reach a place where French civilians have still remained, and they rush out to greet us; old men and women, and young children, thin, ill-clad, looking half starved. The able-bodied men, boys and girls had been taken away to work for the enemy. A flag flies from every house, the flag that each has treasured and kept securely hidden in readiness for the day of liberation, which has come at last. Everywhere we are welcomed joyously. Passing through Carvin, we reach Bersée, North of Douai, and find new billets at Fréne Farm, where the grateful inhabitants do their utmost to assist us in every possible way.

It was just at this period that British forces made a formal entry into Lille, October 28th, and a day later the Company moved to Ouchy. Lt. Richards had to leave us for hospital, and was soon back in England; he did not return to us. Late additions to our officer strength arrived in the person of Lts. Cookson, Hill, and Sanders, to replace those officers who had departed. Lt. Hill had newly come from home, while Lt. Sanders had been a Gas Adviser to the U.S.A. forces in France. Lt. Cookson came to us after a long spell in hospital in Blighty, where he had been recuperating from a serious leg wound. He had seen much service in the trenches with a West Yorks battalion, and gave us the benefit of his valuable experience, imparted with typical Yorkshire sagacity and humour.

News was constantly being received of further big German retreats, and of very little opposition to the swiftly advancing British troops. November began with sensational rumours of a German collapse, and the possibilities of surrender. We expected to be on the move Eastwards again at any moment, but not one of us from the O/C down to the humblest pioneer, was prepared for the orders which suddenly came upon us. We were to move at once far South of the American front. Actually, we were one of nine Companies allotted to co-operate with the U.S. Army, to assist in gas offensive operations in support of a big offensive which was already imminent. Some Companies were to proceed to the 1st U.S. Army near Verdun, and the remainder, including C Company, to the 2nd Army in front of Metz. On Nov. 5th, we entrained at Douai, and set out on the long slow trek via Paris to the Southern front. This journey was not entirely without incident, for a highly amusing diversion occurred near the

the end. The train was shunted into a siding overnight, prior to the final run on the following morning, and orders were given that no one was to leave it on any account. However, our enterprising Pnr. Coste thought otherwise, and led some of his bosom pals to a nearby estaminet, the cellar of which they raided, and returned to the train with a small cask of red wine. The ensuing drinks naturally provoked a spirit of mischief, and the bolder lads decided to uncouple the rear coach in which were the Company officers and sergeants. Having accomplished this satisfactorily the culprits slept the sleep of the just. In the early hours, the train set off once more, minus the rear coach with its unsuspecting occupants, and in due course arrived at its destination. The American officer who was waiting to welcome his Allies was greatly surprised to find our famous Company turn up under the supreme command of Cpl. Cowlshaw! However, Officers and men were later reunited, and the culprits were never found.

Great events were shaping in national affairs, and moving to a climax much faster than our train. On the 7th, news reached us that German envoys had left for the Northern front to ask for terms with reference to a cessation of hostilities. On the 10th, the sensational news of the Kaiser's abdication came through; surely the end could not be far off. The Company had only just arrived at its new billets in Pont a Mousson, a village on the main road about midway between Metz and Nancy, when official news arrived of a complete German surrender, and the actual fixing of an Armistice for 11:00 a.m. on Nov. 11th.

We shall never forget that first Armistice Day. Celebrations took place amid wild rejoicing;

the Company went mad with delight, and there were mutual congratulations that we had been fortunate enough to win through to the end. It is worth recalling, however, that the sudden cessation of hostilities seemed at first unreal to us all, too good to be true. In the neighbourhood, loud explosions at intervals during the following night made us momentarily anxious as to whether it was all really over. No work was done, and many of us made pleasant trips into Nancy, where the celebrations continued for several days. The whole town was decorated with flags, chiefly the Tricolour and the Stars and Stripes, for the people had not seen any British troops in their area. The streets were illuminated for the first time in four years; thousands of French soldiers swarmed around, making merry. The civilians crowded the streets parading to and fro in their joy, and the very slightest opportunity was seized upon for cheers and singing; it was a royal welcome. We had to correct the impression that we were "American", and repeatedly emphasize the word "Anglais". Metz, which had been under German occupation since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, was now abandoned by them on Nov. 17th, and the following day a number of us went into the city while it was still in a state of great unrest, as the French advance guards took possession. German names on streets and shops were being torn down, and replaced by French; statues of German notabilities were dragged from their pedestals and smashed, often being thrown into the river; a statue of the Kaiser on an outer wall of the cathedral hung in chains.

On the 19th, the French Army made its formal entry into Metz, led by the famous General Petain on a white horse. Many of us were fortunate enough to witness this great event, and it was an imposing scene as cavalry, infantry, artillery,

and armoured units passed through the streets, the bands playing "Marche de Lorraine" and "The Marseillaise". Girls dressed in beautiful Alsatian costumes presented flowers to the commanding officers and showered them upon the advancing ranks.

During this period, thousands of war prisoners released by the Germans were pouring Westward along all the roads from their prison camps. We went out with lorries, collecting as many as we could; many were in pitiable condition, and so weak with long trekking and lack of food that they had not sufficient strength to climb into our vehicles. We conveyed some French prisoners from Verdun, but it was at Metz where we served the greatest need. The fortress was crowded with released prisoners, British, French, Italians, Belgians, Russians. They were frantic with joy at their release, and among the babel of languages we were able to sort out the British and convey them to a rescue camp, while the French authorities began to cope with the others. The former German barracks had been hurriedly abandoned, and left packed with equipment of all kinds; for a short time it was a case of help yourself, and some of our number did a roaring trade in German Helmets with the Americans, who fancied this type of war souvenir more than any other.

The American unit to which we were attached certainly looked after us well in the matter of food supplies. They had everything. But a unique incident came to light later. While drawing rations on one occasion, our Q.M.S. saw a large case waiting to be picked up, and it duly reached our Q.M. Stores, contents unknown. It turned out to be packed with tins of spaghetti. Sometime afterwards, there came an award to our

Q. M. S., a Belgian "Croix de Guerre", with "glaive en argent", and this was for meritorious service. One recalls the crowd of men seated around a glorious fire in one of our billets, being entertained by Capt. Strange, M.C., who was an adept at telling yarns and gave us many thrilling accounts of his pre-war experiences with Jack London in Alaska. But we were now a long way from home, and anxious to be moving back again. On Nov. 27th, the eagerly awaited orders came, and the Company made the long train journey once more, finally arriving in our original depot area, to find billets in the small village of Lumbres, not far from Hallines.

On December 14th, our last move together as a Company was made, and we came to Helfaut. What a memorable occasion it was to find ourselves back at the very place where we had assembled for the Review two and a half years ago, the herald to our start on a great venture into the unknown, a venture which had brought us so many experiences through all the changing fortunes of war. So our last Christmas together arrived, and was duly celebrated in a truly joyous manner. Each Section vied with others in providing and enjoying the most satisfying Dinner, after which, those who were still sober discussed the probabilities of demobilisation.

CHAPTER VI

1919--JOURNEY'S END

When the New Year arrived it was this time certainly welcomed with joyous optimism by one and all. The trials and privations of the Great War were over, and every individual made plans for his return to "civvy life". A plague of influenza swept through the armies in France during the first weeks of the year, and many of us were incapacitated for a time. The sudden and unexpected death from flu of a well-known member of the Company came as a great shock; this was Pte. Fitzgerald, A.S.C., who had been a lorry driver with us ever since Hallines days, and had taken us cheerfully and untiringly on so many of our rough journeys to the trenches and elsewhere. Some work was allotted to keep us busy and out of mischief, but no one showed much keenness in filling up trenches or mending roads. One of our number had often reiterated, during the past years, his willingness to stay out in France filling up trenches, if only the war would end. Needless to say, he was now missing when the opportunity had arrived for him to carry out his wish.

Demobilisation was now beginning, and very soon speeded up; one by one our comrades left us

and the Company visibly shrank. Many amongst us had formed lasting friendships, forged and strengthened through all the vicissitudes of the war, and were loth to separate when the hour of parting came. The songs which had relieved our feelings, comforted and inspired us throughout the past years, were sung again and again. We remember, among many, such favourites as "Keep the home fires burning", "There's a long, long trail a-winding", and "When the great red dawn is shining". There were happy evenings when we sang every song we could remember; the old parodies especially were in great demand in concert room and in barn, and there were also the more recent ones which had been composed as reminders of our work. To quote one or two of these will bring back vivid memories, but only the men of the Special Brigade will fully appreciate the aptness of their themes, and be able to visualise the actual scenes relating to them.

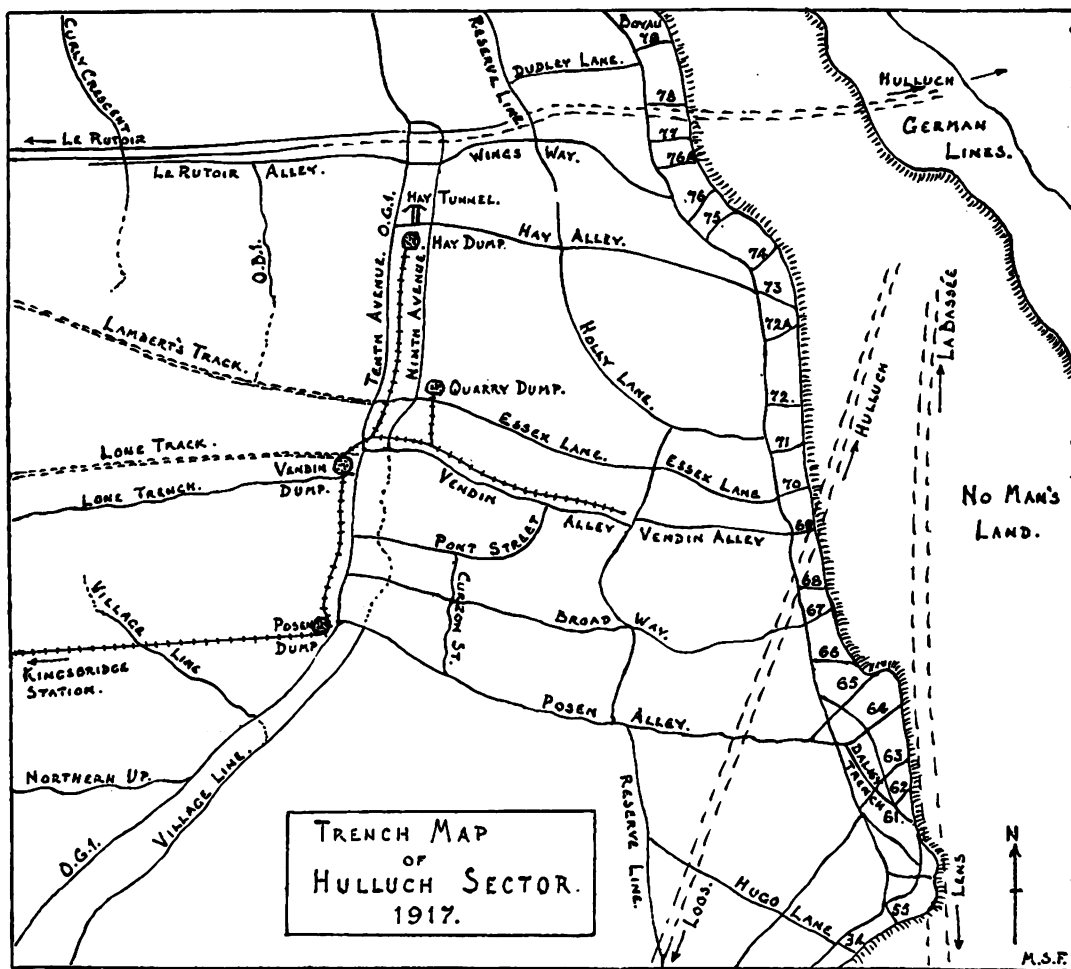
To the tune of "I'm the son of a gambolier":-

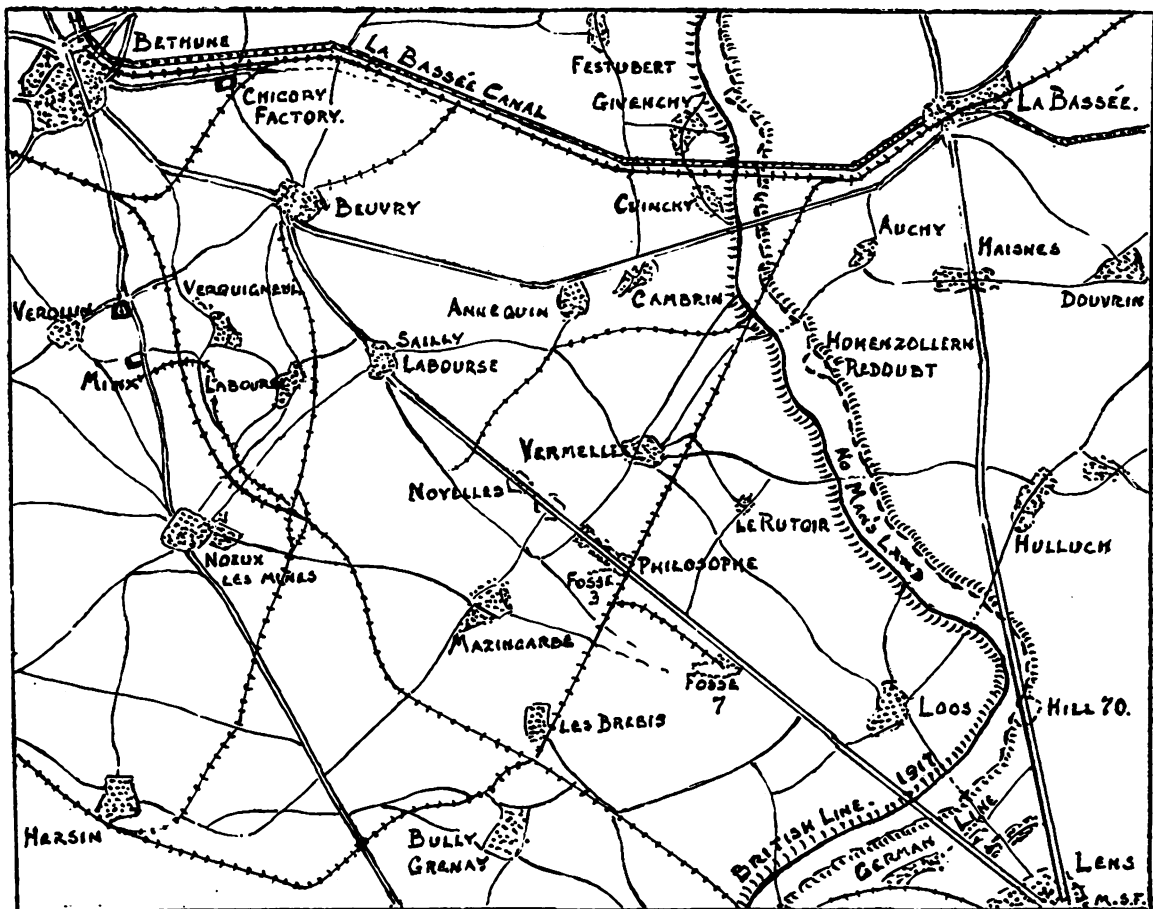
1. One day we went up to the line,
Way round by Vendin Alley;
And as we got into the trench,
You bet we didn't dally.
The minniewerfers rained around
With never a single dud;
We dumped our oojahs on the ground,
And lost them in the mud.
2. One night we went up for a strafe,
And everything seemed fine;
The wind was in our favour,
And zero was at nine.
But as we turned the oojahs on
And made a lovely stench,
We found that Fritz was wide awake,

We went down to the Yankee front,
Oh, 'twas a lovely ride;
We had such gorgeous cattle-trucks
With "forty hommes" inside.
But when we reached our journey's end,
Feeling rather sore,
We found the Armistice was signed,
For the Yanks had won the war.

Also, a reminder of our projector attacks:-

Finally, the Pioneer's song, which pilloried every





AREA OF MAIN ACTIVITIES OF 186 COMPANY AND C SPECIAL COMPANY. R.E.

rank up to General with very appropriate comments; there were many variations, too:

"If you want to see the Pioneers,
 We know where they are,
 We know where they are,
 We've seen them, we've seen them,
 Digging-in the four foot guns."
 etc.

No history of 'C' Special Company would be complete without some reference to Cpl. Mortimer, beloved, and known to us all as "Morty". He was the son of a schoolmaster, an Oxonian, and a great Rugger player in his day; he was one of the oldest of us, yet still had more energy than many of his juniors; kindly and sympathetic, hard working and thoroughly conscientious, unperturbable in all circumstances, always pulling his weight to the full, and never known to complain, except in the politest of terms. His R.E. service commenced with 186 Company, after which, he became one of the nucleus of 'C' Company. During the summer of 1916, when his brother in the S.A. Field Artillery was at Loos, he used to obtain leave for a few days from our Skipper, during lulls in gas activity, and spend the time with his brother, serving the guns. Until early 1918, he took part in every possible attack with us, and was not particularly happy when, as a well-deserved promotion for his work, he was sent to a Gas Training School behind Bethune. He preferred to be with his old comrades, and whenever he got wind of an impending strafe by his Company, he secured a "leave" from the school to rejoin us when we went up to the trenches. Of many stories which he could relate, the choicest surely must not be omitted. He was in charge of a demonstration

given by the Gas School, to show to a large parade of troops and "brass hats" the efficacy and fool-proof qualities of gas projectors. The actual drums to be used for the demonstration were not, of course, "live", but filled with water. Hence, when they reached their target there would be nothing to show in the way of a gas discharge. To obviate this, Morty attached a phosphorus bomb to each drum, with fuses graduated in length to allow him to run along the line igniting them in turn before pushing down the exploder. Hence, when the drums soared through the air and landed, the bursting phosphorus bombs would produce a highly spectacular effect. On the great day the troops were drawn up to see the show. Morty had tested his circuits and nothing could go wrong. He pooped the exploder; nothing happened. He pooped again and again, still no result. Meanwhile, the fuses of the bombs that he had lit were burning merrily, and presently, the bombs all exploded at the muzzles of the guns, giving a wonderful effect upon which the eyes of all were focussed. No one looked for any drums speeding through the air, and, of course, they were still within the guns. The chief brass hat congratulated Morty on a very satisfactory demonstration, and the troops marched off. When all was quiet, Morty disconnected his wiring, very gingerly removed a gas drum and examined his "gunpowder". His fingers were damp with sweat, and he noticed that they were now stained purple after he had touched the powder. In a flash the secret was out; his gunpowder was potassium permangante, the explanation being that he had collected it by mistake from a dump of mixed salvage stores!

One other incident which was typical of Morty must be told. It happened that he and

Cpl. F. were walking back from Loos village on one occasion in the early hours, and Fritz was shelling the road to catch any returning transport. As the two were approaching Suicide Corner, they saw that this danger spot was being shelled methodically by one gun which was firing at definite intervals, dropping a 5.9 every minute and a half with great accuracy. 'Morty', walking at his usual pace, was busy counting these intervals, and announced that at this rate of walking we should arrive at the corner just at a safe moment. His companion suggested waiting for a burst, and then running past at top speed. But Morty's unchanged pace and placid attitude kept him in control. The words: "We shall be safely past before the next one comes" had hardly been uttered, when there came the terrific rush of a shell, followed by a deafening explosion. Both men were down instantly, the faces to the mud, as shell fragments hissed over them. As they got up again, and groped for their steel helmets in the road, there came the quiet comment from Morty, "It's rather strange that they should alter the timing of that gun!"

So the days came during which 'C' Company reached its end. Prospects of a continuation of the Special Brigade were revived when volunteers were requested for service in North Russia, to assist in military action against Bolshevik forces in the region of Archangel. Majors Davies and Nye, and Lts. Alderson and Grantham joined a contingent which proceeded to General Denikin's White Army. Use was made of "arsenical smokes," but beyond this there was little activity, and all the British forces were later withdrawn. They

had probably found France warmer in every way.

The final cadre of our Company left France in July, and safely conveyed what was left of our records to Chatham. The only member of this small group of men who can be brought to memory was Q. M. S. 'Jock' Towers, of the old section 16. He had often been severely harangued by Capt. Davies for refusing to accept promotion when he was a pioneer, but final greatness was thrust upon him.

Far too many years have passed since those days which this story has attempted to recall. The tale is of necessity very incomplete, and it is regretted that so much information which would have been invaluable in its compilation is now unobtainable. What a story it would have made! It is especially a matter for profound regret, and all my living comrades will share with me in this, that through the course of time so many names have been lost to us, the names of those comrades who assuredly deserved more than ordinary mention in the annuals of the activities of 'C' Special Company, R.E.

"Some alas, their labour ended,
Now have passed within the veil;
Knightly souls, who, often unfriended,
Sought through life the Holy Grail.
Though their deeds are not engraven
In the storey'd halls of fame,
Yet to their desired haven,
Have they borne an honoured name"

OUR REUNIONS

We veterans of 'C' Special Company, R.E. are rightly proud of our unique and splendid record of annual reunions, and so some detailed information of this function which has long been an institution should certainly be included here.

When the Company was demobilised in the early months of 1919, and its members returned to "civvy life", there lingered in the hearts of many a desire to meet old companions again. This urge persisted, and it only needed someone to "set the ball rolling" for it to be fulfilled. For this, we picture the chance meeting of Frank Handy and Donald Grantham in Charing Cross Road, towards the end of 1919. In their talk together, the same wish was expressed:- "How about getting together as many of the old Company as we can, and having a meal and a gossip somewhere?" To speak was to act, as befitting two good Special R.E.s. Grantham still possessed a list of addresses of his Section 12 members, and a start was made with this. A letter was sent to each with the request for any further addresses known; so contacts were soon established and quickly widened. This encouraging response led to a decision to arrange a Reunion Dinner in London as soon as possible. Major Davies was contacted, for he was still in England, and he willingly assisted by obtaining excellent facilities for this affair at the Imperial Hotel, Russell Square. "K.J!"

and "Aldy" were often hovering around this vicinity visiting the "Skipper", and naturally they added their enthusiasm to the idea.

In November 1919, the first circular letter was sent out over the signatures of T. H. Davies, A. W. Davies, and F. Handy, using an address list of nearly 240. This brought enthusiastic replies, and nearly one hundred old pals assembled for the first Reunion on Jan. 24, 1920. They came from all parts of the country, from Kent to Devon, from Milford Haven to Carlisle, from Essex to Tyneside, with a large and lively contingent from over Hadrian's Wall and chiefly from Glasga'. Those who were unable to attend sent letters of congratulation and good wishes for the success of this event. It was an overwhelming success. In those days an excellent dinner cost us 3s.6d., due to the "Skipper's" kind intercession on our behalf, with the use of a large private room and piano. After this, there was no question about the demand for the repetition of such a gathering, and Grantham and Handy volunteered to act as joint organisers of it.

Thus enjoyable and inspiring Reunions took place under their direction until 1925. The following year, Grantham went abroad to carry out pioneer geological work in East Africa, and Cecil Harman kindly volunteered to take his place. Throughout the long period from 1927 to 1953, Handy and Harman ensured the continued success of our annual gatherings, between 70 and 80 members attending regularly for many years. Unfortunately, the annual sequence was interrupted by the second World War, but it was resumed as quickly as possible afterwards. The lapse of several years, coupled with the tragedies and upheavals of the war had seriously affected our numbers and our contacts, but by strenuous efforts

a good muster was obtained once more. In 1954, Handy retired to Charmouth, and since then Harman has taken upon himself the whole organisation. Our most grateful thanks are due to our secretaries for their long and untiring service, willingly given on our behalf, which has successfully maintained the continuity of our Reunions. It is worth recording that we are still in touch with about 60 members. Many of those who cannot attend send cheery letters on each occasion, and are very much with us in thought.

On March 10, 1956, our 30th Reunion was celebrated, and 23 members were present. The "high light" of this event was the surprise visit of Edgar Cross, who flew over from Toronto specially for the occasion; this was his second attendance, the first being at the Inaugural Dinner in 1920, prior to his departure for Canada. Medals for meritorious service should certainly be awarded to the Holderness brothers of Boston, Lincs, for they are the only members who have never missed a Reunion; nothing stops them, for they have come through strikes, storms and floods. Walter usually arrives by train, but Bill, on occasion, has used his own plane, and landed safely.

The passing years have inevitably taken their toll, and many of those who gathered so enthusiastically, and yarned and sang with us, have now passed on. Our faithful "Skipper", Major Davies went to Tasmania, entered politics, and held the office of Minister of Labour. He died some years after the war.

So many other stalwarts, too, we remember; there come to mind the names of Adcock, Alderson,

Burrows, Catto, Cracknell, Dixon, Garside, Gorley, Hand, Harbourne, Haskell, Hitchens, Huntley, Jones, E., Joyce, Morkill, Mortimer, Nourse, Purvis, Rayns, Richards, Robb, Sandison, Vincent, Wait; and there are others too. But the loyalty and enthusiasm of those who remain does not diminish, and each new year we all "stand-by for orders" to rally at "The Imperial".

It is our earnest hope that these Reunions will still continue for many years, and when the time comes that age prevents our meeting, may we turn to the "Story of 186 Company and 'C' Special Company, R.E." once again, remembering with pride and gratitude that unique, enriching, and abiding comradeship which was forged amid the perils, anxieties, and varying fortunes of those wartime days, and which ever since has been our cherished possession.

G. B. C.
JUL 14 1977

